

Into The Haze

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Into The Haze

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Summary





This amazing artwork is by [@star-dog!](#) It fits the mood and content of the story perfectly, and I couldn't be happier with it!!! ♥♥♥

Written for [@nbchannibalbigbang](#).

This is a canon-typical piece wherein Will's recent bout with hallucination-inducing encephalitis has him -- and everyone around him -- questioning whether or not the person he claims is stalking him is real or imagined. After a dangerous encounter, Will is left injured and confused. His friends are concerned that this was not the work of a supposed stalker but rather a hallucination that caused Will to injure himself. Hannibal is the only one who thinks Will's stalker story is a possibility, and they concoct a plan to find out the truth.

[Please excuse the obviously-not-beta'd work. XD]

Chapter 1

Will looked out through the windshield of his car that was parked in the shallow grass beside the road. Members of the FBI milled about the overgrown field in the distance, measuring, photographing, and placing evidence markers. Bright yellow crime scene tape cordoned off the area, not that there was anyone else around. Nobody but the FBI and whatever mess of a body lay in the field before them.

Will spotted Jack in the middle of the fray, talking with an agent whose name escaped him. He wondered how long he could remain in his vehicle. How long it would take for Jack to come looking for him.

Will leaned over and popped open the glove compartment. He found the small, white bottle of aspirin inside and shook two pills into his hand. The symptoms of his encephalitis were mostly gone, thanks to the medication he had been taking. Or trying to take. He hadn't exactly been as consistent with it as he should have been.

He had spent a couple of nights in the hospital after collapsing weeks earlier. But the doctors had finally determined the cause of his maladies. His physical ones, anyway. He had been off of the job since. That was, until Jack had called him an hour earlier. Evidently, the agent had decided it was time for Will to get back to work, doctor's orders be damned.

Will tossed the aspirin into the back of his throat and worked them down without a drink. His encephalitis might have been treated, but his aversion to crime scenes was not.

It wasn't long before Jack turned and looked in Will's direction. He stood still for a few moments – probably waiting for Will to emerge from his vehicle. When Will didn't, Jack started across the field towards him. Will smirked. But he waited. He waited until Jack was within feet of his car before Will opened the door.

Jack spread his arms out to his sides, his eyebrows skyrocketing. "Were you waiting for an invitation?"

Will got out of the car and closed the door, his breath misting out in front of his face. "I assumed that's what your call was." He retrieved a knit cap from his pocket and pulled it down over his ears.

"You assume right. Let's go."

Will sauntered over to him but said nothing. He didn't even look at him. He stared out across the field, wondering what kind of hell was awaiting him.

Jack let out a sigh and then turned back towards the field. He began to trudge through the overgrown field, following the path of grass and weeds that was smashed down from where Will assumed the FBI agents had come and gone all day long.

When they reached the group of agents, Will's stomach tightened. He knew he would never get used to that feeling. The feeling of approaching a crime scene, wondering what was in store for him. Wondering who had taken the life of a fellow human being. Wondering why. Wondering what kind of visions and nightmares he would be left with from trying to answer all of the persistent questions.

As they high-stepped through the overgrowth, Will had the urge to tell Jack he had changed his mind. That he was going back to his car and driving away from this place. That he was done with all of this.

But he didn't. He knew that feeling would be even worse. The feeling of a murderer on the loose and a murder going unsolved. He wasn't sure he could live with himself if he just walked away.

So he stayed. And he looked. And his stomach seized at the sight of a young, red-headed woman carved into several pieces. Will didn't look long enough to count how many pieces were scattered among the grass blades.

"Her name's Margaret Filch. She's a college student at the University of Maryland. Her roommate reported her missing after a campus party last weekend."

"Are there any suspects?"

"Her roommate and boyfriend were questioned at the time of the disappearance. Both were at the party and said her not coming home was very unusual behavior for her."

"College party. Alcohol. Stranger things have happened than a drunk party-goer not returning home."

"That's the thing. She was the designated driver."

Will looked down at the corpse again. Her limbs were separated from her body and cut into two pieces each. Her head and torso were still attached, her clouded, lifeless eyes staring up at the clear, afternoon sky. The hair on one side of her head was matted with dark red, dried blood. She had a large bruise off to one side of her forehead. Will glanced at her hands, which were detached at the wrists. They were positioned with the palms up, but her fingertips were missing. Jack had the rest of the agents clear the area, and Will got to work.

The pendulum of light swung behind his eyes, and then he was in an unfamiliar room that appeared hazy at the edges. The only thing that looked clear to him was the red-head. She stood in front of him, arms folded, crying. He stepped towards her, but she backed away. He lunged at her and she screamed, fighting him off and running for the door. He grabbed at her long, flowing hair, wrapping his fingers around several locks and tugging her backwards. She reached back and clawed at him, leaving long scratches across his neck. He grasped her hair at the scalp and slammed her head into the door. She cried out and stopped struggling, but she wasn't unconscious. Will dragged her, by her hair, away from the door. A small, heavy object appeared in his hands. He stared down at the red-head on the floor. She looked up at him with wide eyes. She rolled over and tried to claw herself across the room. Will easily kept up with

her sluggish getaway. He brought his arm back, the heavy weapon still in his grasp, and he swung it down. It connected with the side of her head and she stopped moving.

Will panted as his surroundings changed. He was in the field once again, standing over the sectioned body of the woman he had just murdered in his vision. He put a hand to the side of his neck, the sharp pain from moments earlier having vanished.

“She scratched him.”

Jack was at his side again in moments. “That’s why her fingers are missing?”

“Yes.”

“The team looked around the area but found nothing else. No fingers.”

Will shook his head. “He wouldn’t have left them.”

“Why leave her body at all, then?”

“He wanted her to be found. He must think he can’t be identified by the pieces he left behind.”

“Well, he hasn’t met our team,” Jack said, lowering his voice slightly.

Will ignored the bravado and said, “It was passionate. She knew her attacker. You need to question everyone she knew. Family. Friends. Professors. Classmates. Anyone she’s had contact with.”

“Looks like we’ll need everybody on this.”

Will nodded. He turned and, without waiting for permission from Jack, walked away from the body.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve done all I can do here,” he called over his shoulder. “Doctor Lecter is expecting me.” He didn’t wait to hear Jack’s reply. He continued trudging through the overgrown field, back to his waiting vehicle. He slipped behind the wheel and drove slowly through the shorter grass until he hit the road.

As he drove towards the heart of the city, he noticed a dark blue sedan in his rearview mirror. Will took as many back roads as he could, but the car continued to follow. He hadn’t noticed it at the crime scene and suddenly wished he had been paying more attention when he had left. The car followed him all the way into the city, and as Will pulled into the parking lot outside of Doctor Lecter’s office, he readied himself to hop out of his car and confront the person. But the other car kept going. It sped past the parking lot, and as Will pulled into a spot beside Hannibal’s Bentley, he watched the dark blue sedan round a corner and disappear from sight.

The crime scene had left Will feeling uneasy enough as it was. But the possibility of someone following him set his nerves on edge. He took a deep breath and got out of the car, secretly relieved that he was headed into a therapy session.

Chapter 2

Hannibal allowed himself a friendly smile as he opened the door to his waiting room. Will stood on the other side. His glasses were on, and his hair was as unruly as ever. He wore a navy blue coat over several loose layers, and both hands fidgeted as he turned towards Hannibal.

“Good evening, Will.”

Will nodded but said nothing. Hannibal stepped aside and Will walked past him, into the office. As Hannibal gently closed the door, he turned towards his patient-slash-friend. Will wandered around behind the couch, behind the chair in which he normally sat, and finally came to a halt at Hannibal’s desk. He picked up a pen and fidgeted with it.

Hannibal walked to his chair and sat down, crossed his legs, and folded his hands in his lap.

“You seem agitated.”

“I think someone was following me.”

Hannibal tilted his head. “What would give you that idea?”

Will put the pen down on the wrong side of the desk and turned to look at Hannibal. He leaned back, half-sitting on the front of the desk. “There was a car behind me almost the entire way from the crime scene.”

“Was it at the crime scene?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t notice it until I was on the road.”

“What did this car do when you pulled into the parking lot here?”

“Kept going.”

Hannibal watched Will. The latter tapped his fingers against the surface of the wooden desk. “You went to your first crime scene today.”

Will’s features contorted.

“How was that?” Hannibal asked.

“How did you know about that?”

“Jack called me.”

Will scoffed and pushed off the desk. He walked around the empty chair across from Hannibal and sauntered towards the windows to Hannibal’s right.

“Tell me about the crime scene, Will.”

“A young woman was killed,” Will said dully.

It sounded emotionless, but Hannibal knew better. He waited for Will to continue.

“Her limbs were detached from her body and severed in two.” He turned enough so that he could see Hannibal. “She was killed by someone she knew.”

“How did you feel when Jack called you?”

Will’s eyes darted around the room, not focusing on anything in particular. He took in a deep breath, exhaling slowly and audibly. “About the same as every other time Jack has called me.”

“Do you feel you are ready to return to work?”

“Does it matter?” Will offered a wry smile. He sauntered away from the windows, stopping when he reached the chair across from Hannibal. “Jack won’t be denied.”

“Perhaps your own desire to help will not be denied.”

Will sat down, absently waving a hand. “That too.”

“What did the car look like?”

Will furrowed his brow for a moment and then, as he sat back, the crease between his eyebrows disappeared. “Dark blue, four-door sedan.”

“Had you seen the vehicle before?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Have you been regularly taking your medication?”

Will didn’t answer immediately. He met Hannibal’s gaze and his mouth morphed into a crooked, awkward smile. “You think I hallucinated this car?”

Hannibal spread his hands a few inches apart. “I am simply attempting to rule it out as a possibility.”

“Yes, I have been consistent with my meds. No more hallucinations or lost time for me, Doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal smiled at Will’s attempt to distance himself. “That is good to hear, Will,” he said; although, he wasn’t entirely sure that he believed the younger man.

“The headaches, however...”

“You are still having headaches.”

Will lifted his eyebrows and looked away as he nodded.

“The headaches are not necessarily encephalitis-induced in your case.”

Will furrowed his brow and shook his head.

“Your work is very stressful,” Hannibal clarified.

Will snorted.

Hannibal waited for one of Will’s patented sardonic comments, but none came. “Jack is a bloodhound,” Hannibal continued, assuming Will would appreciate the canine reference.

The corner of Will’s mouth twitched. “That is a fair assessment. He can be rather short-sighted when it comes to cases.”

“No matter who is caught in the path.”

“You think I’m caught in his path?”

“I think Jack is more concerned with solving the case than the stress it causes for those around him.”

“‘Those around him,’ meaning me.”

Hannibal nodded once, holding Will’s gaze.

“If everyone quit their jobs because they were stressed, the employment rate would plummet to almost non-existent.”

Hannibal smiled. “There is stressed and then there is overwhelmed.”

Will shook his head.

“I don’t want to see your health affected because you felt an obligation to Jack to return to work too soon.”

“It’s not an obligation to Jack. It’s an obligation to solving murders.”

“To your own detriment.”

“I’m not going to break.”

Hannibal waited a beat and then said, “Let’s make sure you don’t.”

Chapter 3

Will's heart raced as he stood in the middle of the forest. It was nighttime, but the silvery light of the moon worked its way through the canopy of trees, causing the blanket of snow on the ground to sparkle. Will wasn't sure where he was. He spun slowly, taking in his surroundings, but it all looked the same. Trees as far as he could see in the darkness.

And something else. Something...moving.

He stopped spinning and focused on the movement in the distance. He heard a hearty chuff and saw a billowing of mist. Then, the animal moved closer. The large, black beast with razor-sharp antlers and a coat made of feathers. It walked slowly towards Will, shadows falling all around the creature as it moved closer. It picked up speed, and Will's stomach tightened. The feathered stag broke into a sprint, racing straight for Will.

Will tried to turn and run, but his feet wouldn't move. It was as though they were bound in concrete. He looked down and found that the snow was no longer just a blanket on the ground. It was chest-high, and Will was trapped in it as the beast quickly closed the gap between them.

Will struggled against the snow but couldn't break free. He looked up at the approaching stag, and as it neared him, he closed his eyes. His face stung from the cold but the rest of his body felt numb. The woods were quiet except for the sounds of Will's panting and the crunching of snow beneath the stag's galloping hooves.

Will took in a deep breath and waited for the stag to gore him. But the attack never came. He heard the crunching of snow get quieter and he opened his eyes. The snow had reverted to a simple blanket once again and the sound of the stag's footsteps softened behind him. Will turned around to see the stag disappear into the darkness of the night. But the crunching continued.

It came from a new direction. Will turned to face the sound but saw nothing. The crunching grew louder and his breathing picked up. He had thought the stag's approach was terrifying, but somehow this was worse. Not seeing. Not knowing.

The sound of crunching snow stopped.

Will opened his eyes.

He stared up at the familiar ceiling and then sat bolt upright. His t-shirt clung to his torso as he flung the sheet back off his legs. His dogs were in the room with him, some lying in their beds, some standing, milling about the room, looking at Will. Or the window behind him.

The crunching sound started again, and Will sprung to his feet.

He wasn't in the woods. The noise wasn't caused by a stag. He was awake now, and the sound was coming from outside his house.

Will moved across the wooden floor in his bare feet, trying to remain as quiet as possible. He kept the lights off as he skulked through his house. Half of his dogs followed as he walked to his front door. He peered out the window but saw nothing. No movement. No stags or otherwise.

He grabbed his coat from the chair nearby and slipped his feet into his boots by the door. He found his shotgun standing beside the desk and checked to make sure it was loaded. Then, he went to the front door.

He opened the door just wide enough for him to slip through. He kept his leg in the opening to prevent any of his furry companions from following. He kept a hold of the door handle and eased it closed behind him as he slipped out through the screen door.

There were no lights on inside or around his house. Patches of snow glowed in the fields under the bright moonlight.

He held the shotgun with both hands, scanning the front yard for movement. Seeing nothing but the silently falling snow, he crept along the front of the house, across the porch. When he reached the end, he lifted the shotgun, readying it to fire.

He took a deep breath and pivoted around the corner of the house, staring down the barrel of the shotgun. His breath misted out in front of him and he scanned the side yard. Nothing. He stepped off the porch and stalked around the side of his house. Patches of snow spotted his yard from days past. The new snow would reach the ground and melt instantly, adding nothing new to the previous accumulation. But the forecast called for several inches overnight, so Will knew it wouldn't be long before the temperatures dropped below freezing.

Will wound his way around the snow patches, sticking to the path of brown grass. He walked to the window above his bed and glanced down. His stomach tightened. There, in the patch of snow, was a very distinct footprint. And not just any footprint. A human footprint. A boot print, more like. And from the size of it, it looked to be a man's.

Will spun away from the house, aiming the shotgun as he scanned the empty field surrounding his house. His eyes landed on the shed off to the side and then headed towards it. He kept an eye on his surroundings as he approached. When he reached the door, he unlatched it and swung open one of the doors.

Will whipped the muzzle of the shotgun into the opening of the door. He stepped inside, careful to tread lightly. He saw no signs of movement, but the shed was dark. If anyone had been inside, they could easily have been hiding, and Will wouldn't have seen them. He crept along the front wall of the shed until he found an oil lantern hanging near the corner. He turned it on and the area around him illuminated. The rest of the room was dim, but Will could see well enough. He glanced around the space but saw nothing. He left the lamp where it was and moved through the shed, checking around the table and chest freezer to make sure no one was hiding.

Satisfied that he was alone in the shed, he lowered the shotgun to his side. He went to the back door of the shed and jostled it, making sure it was locked. Then he walked to the front,

turned off the lamp and left the shed. He shut the door and latched it and then returned to the front porch.

As he went inside the house, he nudged the dogs aside and then closed and locked the front door. He checked the back door and, finding it locked as well, returned his shotgun to its spot beside the desk. He shrugged out of his jacket and kicked off his shoes.

Despite the hour, Will felt wide awake. Instead of returning to bed, he changed clothes. He went to the kitchen and made food for the dogs, and then he sat at his desk and made fishing lures until the sunrise outside his windows lightened the sky to a steely shade of blue.

Chapter 4

By the time Will arrived at the morgue in the early afternoon, he had been up for most of the day. His morning was spent fishing at the lake near his home. He hadn't caught anything – the fish were reluctant to bite in such cold temperatures. He had only been out a couple of hours before his feet went numb in his boots. He had returned home to have an early lunch, lectured two classes at the academy, and then received a call from Jack to meet him at the morgue as soon as possible.

When Will arrived, Jack was already there – looking impatient as usual – alongside Beverly, Jimmy, and Zeller. Will lurked near the outskirts of the room, folding his arms as he listened to the others recite the forensic findings.

There wasn't enough blood in the field for her to have been killed there. It had been done elsewhere, which Will already knew. They also confirmed Will's suspicion that she had been bludgeoned over the head with a blunt weapon, most likely the corner of a heavy object. Both head wounds had been sustained pre-mortem. She had no defensive wounds, no drugs in her system, and hadn't been raped. Jack and his team had already interviewed several of Margaret Filch's friends, relatives, and acquaintances.

"A couple of girls from the party thought they had seen her with a guy at the party," Jack said. "Not her boyfriend."

"Anyone they knew?" Will asked.

Jack shook his head. "Not that they recognized. Evidently there was a rumor going around that she had been involved in a secret relationship."

"Any rumors about who that might have been?"

"Not specifically. But one of her friends thought it was a professor."

"What did her boyfriend have to say about that?" Will asked, adjusting his glasses.

"He acted surprised but the way he clenched his jaw repeatedly for the duration of the conversation, I got the idea that he already had his own suspicions."

"And possibly bashed her over the head as payback?"

Jack shook his head. "He has an alibi."

"He was at the party."

Jack nodded. "Right. We have several witnesses who can place him at the party during the time of the murder."

"Drunk witnesses," Zeller chimed in.

Will stalked towards the center of the room, staring at the pallid corpse on the table. “That doesn’t mean they didn’t see him. And drunk doesn’t mean hallucinating.” Will’s stomach turned and he fixed his gaze somewhere over Jack’s shoulder. “We need to find the professor.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Jack said. “We have interviews set up for all of Margaret Filch’s professors. As well as others she had for courses in previous semesters or ones she might have had contact with.”

Will nodded, glancing towards the door. He was more than ready to leave.

“I thought you could join me,” Jack said.

“Okay.”

“Read these people. Give a little insight as to what they’re thinking.”

Will refrained from rolling his eyes and reminding Jack that he wasn’t a mind-reader. “When?”

“Tomorrow. Some of them are being interviewed tonight by fellow agents. I thought we could take some of them tomorrow.”

“Great.”

By the time Jack dismissed everyone, it was mid-evening. Will had been invited to Hannibal’s house for dinner, and he drove straight there from the morgue. It wasn’t until he was halfway to the doctor’s house that he noticed a vehicle in his rearview mirror. The sun was going down and the road was getting dark, but Will was sure that the car was dark blue.

Chapter 5

As Will got out of the car he had parked in front of the doctor's house, he gave his shirt a quick sniff, hoping it didn't reek too much of death. He couldn't smell it himself, but he had lingered in the morgue for so long that he assumed the odor had fatigued his sense of smell.

He glanced in the back seat and then opened the trunk. He found no spare clothing. He convinced himself that Hannibal's sense of smell was so keen that even if Will had changed his clothes, the good doctor still would have been able to smell it in his hair and on his body. Will closed the trunk lid and walked to the front door.

Hannibal let him in a few moments later and when Will hung his jacket on the solid wooden coat rack next to the door, he watched Hannibal's face. The doctor didn't react to what Will assumed was an overpowering scent of decaying corpse. Especially overpowering to Hannibal, who had always seemed to have a heightened olfactory system.

"Come, Will. Let's get you a drink. Jack should be here soon."

Will's ears perked at that. "Jack's coming?"

Hannibal nodded as they reached the beverage cart in the dining room. Hannibal poured a glass of blood red wine. He rattled off the name of it – something Italian that Will wouldn't be able to recite back if he tried – and handed it to him. "I hope that Jack's acceptance of my invitation will not be a problem. Perhaps it was discourteous of me not to inform you sooner."

"Not at all," Will murmured, somehow feeling like the opposite was the truth. He wasn't sure why. It was Hannibal's home. Hannibal's dinner. Hannibal had every right to invite whomever he pleased. Will was just tired of work. Tired of thinking. Of seeing too much. Jack was simply a reminder of all of that. Will sipped at his drink and then glanced up at the doctor who was staring at him. Will forced a smile and raised the glass a little. "Very good. Strong."

Hannibal smiled. "I need to put the finishing touches on dessert. Please, make yourself at home, Will."

At Will's agreement, Hannibal disappeared into the kitchen. Will remained in the dining room, nursing his wine. The fire crackled behind him as he examined the different herbs growing in planters mounted to the wall. He counted ten varieties before the doorbell sounded. Hannibal reappeared, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He made his way through the dining room and vanished around the corner. A moment later, he returned, followed by Jack who smiled when he saw Will.

"Hello, Will."

Will looked him over, noticing that his clothes were different than what he had been wearing at the morgue. Will tamed the snarl that threatened to form and instead forced what he

assumed was a very awkward-looking smile.

“Hello, Jack.”

Hannibal was already at the beverage cart, pouring Jack a drink that matched the small amount of liquid remaining in Will’s glass. When Hannibal handed the glass to Jack, the doctor turned to Will and tilted his head.

“Shall I pour you a refill?”

Will glanced down into his wine glass and shook his head. There was only a small pool of wine in the bottom of his glass, but he hadn’t eaten since morning and really didn’t think it wise to fill up on alcohol when he would have to drive home in a couple of hours. “I think the one glass should be enough.”

“Very well.” Hannibal smiled. “Dinner is nearly done. Make yourselves comfortable.”

Hannibal rounded the corner to the kitchen again, and Will turned back to the plants on the wall. He could feel Jack’s presence closing in on him. When Jack finally spoke, he was right over Will’s shoulder.

“I was surprised to see you already here,” Jack said. “I thought you’d swing by your house first.”

“My house is more than an hour away,” Will uttered. “I would have been late.” A beeping sounded from the next room.

“Perhaps stocking your car with a change of clothes would be a good idea.”

Will turned his head towards Jack without looking at him. “Perhaps not lingering in the morgue for hours would be an even better idea.”

A silence grew between them before Jack said, “Will, we are saving lives.”

Will gritted his teeth. He took a calming breath and then parted his lips to speak.

“Veal medallions in a French morel sauce,” Hannibal said before Will could utter a word.

Will turned away from Jack and walked around to the other side of the table, standing behind the chair nearest the fireplace.

“Please, have a seat,” Hannibal said, setting the platter of veal down in the middle of the table, situated evenly among all three place settings.

When Will and Jack were seated, Hannibal served them both and then himself. He sat at the head of the table and as he cut a small bite of the veal, Jack spoke.

“This looks delicious.”

Hannibal smiled and then rattled off a bit of information about a French custom pertaining to the dish. Will generally found them interesting but all he could think about at the moment was how he wished he hadn't been blindsided by Jack's presence.

"Will?"

Will blinked and looked up. Both Hannibal and Jack were staring at him. "Yes?"

"Is the meal not to your liking?" Hannibal asked.

Will looked down at his plate. He had only taken a few bites, and the majority of his dinner remained untouched. He glanced at Hannibal's and Jack's plates which were more than halfway empty.

"No," Will started. "It's delicious, as usual."

"You are not eating," Hannibal pointed out. He returned his focus to his own plate and cut a piece of meat. He stabbed it with his fork and popped it into his mouth.

"It's not the food."

"Is it me?" Jack asked.

Hannibal looked at Jack and then Will, his eyebrows raising ever so slightly.

"Not entirely," Will said, cutting a piece of his dinner.

"What entirely is it?" Jack asked.

"You're a smart man, Jack," Will started. He poked the square of meat and took a bite. He chewed and swallowed before looking up at the agent and continuing, "I'm sure you can figure it out."

"The case," Jack said.

Will offered a wry smile and then returned his attention to his plate.

"We have been over this," Jack said. "You are saving lives."

"I'm well aware, Jack."

"And your encephalitis is gone. So all of the symptoms you had before should have vanished too, right?"

"My empathy is not a symptom."

"But you can deal with it."

Will kept a hold of his knife and fork but let the ends drop to the plate. A loud clatter rang through Will's ears. Hannibal looked up at him again, but Will wondered if it was more out of concern for his fine China.

Will stared at Jack, taking care to keep his voice calm. "I didn't realize that Hannibal had referred my case to Doctor Crawford."

Jack exhaled a quiet laugh and shook his head. "I need my best people working on these cases." And you," he said, actually pointing a fork in Will's direction, "are my absolute best man."

"Well, I'm sure that compliment will help me sleep better, thank you."

"Will," Hannibal urged.

"My apologies, Doctor Lecter."

Will set down his knife and fork and pulled his napkin from his lap, wiping at his mouth. He had half a mind to toss it on the table and get up to leave, but Hannibal spoke before he had the chance.

"Perhaps a change in subject would be a good idea."

"Perhaps you are right," Jack agreed.

Will squeezed the napkin, debating about what to do with it. Instead of tossing it onto the table, he returned it to his lap.

Hannibal took it upon himself to change the subject, going on about an early European custom regarding dinnertime rituals.

Will focused on his breathing, Jack's reply sounding like a distant slur of syllables. Will was frequently annoyed by Jack's cavalier demeanor, but even he could tell it was bothering him more than usual. He chalked it up to the added stress of going back to work after having been away for longer than normal. But he also attributed it to his preoccupation about the car that seemed to be following him.

When Will felt his heart rate return to normal, he picked up his knife and fork and resumed eating.

Chapter 6

Will lay on the hardwood floor in the sitting room, working on a boat motor. His dogs were scattered around the room. They had been calm and relaxed, most lying on the floor while Will worked. But over the past few minutes, half of them had gotten up, pacing a short path between Will and the front door.

Will set the screw driver on the old towel he had put down to keep the motor from scratching the floor or getting it unnecessarily filthy. Then, he pushed himself up and got to his feet. He grabbed his jacket from the rack by the door and opened the front door. Will stood aside as the dogs spilled out around him, running and barking as they made their way off the porch and across the snowy front yard.

When all the dogs were outside, Will stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind him. He pulled his coat on and tucked his hands into the pockets. His breath misted out in front of his face as he watched his dogs scamper and play in the snow. The powder was just deep enough to cover the ground, but the starkness of it always changed the way things looked.

Will's mind flitted back to the dream he had had a couple nights earlier, where he had been trapped in the snow as the stag prepared to gore him. And then he thought about the events after he had woken up – when he had found boot prints in the snow outside his window. Will pushed off the railing and walked to the end of the porch. He stepped down to the ground and walked along the side of his house. The new snow crunched underfoot and when he got to the window, he looked down. There were no boot prints, but he didn't expect there to be any. The new snow would have covered them.

He looked out into the field beyond the shed. The ground was a pristine canvas except for the few trails of paw prints his dogs had created earlier in the day. Will turned towards the front of his house and, as he reached the side steps to the porch, he saw a car driving up the road. His stomach tightened until he realized whose vehicle it was.

When the car stopped in his driveway, Alana stepped out. She wore a buttoned-up, knee-length black coat with a black and red scarf knotted beneath her chin. Her hair hung in loose waves in front of her shoulders, and she smiled when she looked at Will.

"Hey," Will offered, taking a few leisurely steps towards her car.

Alana closed the door and tucked her hands in the pockets of her coat, walking towards Will. "Hi," she said. Winston trotted over to her and she looked down at him, offering a similar smile to the one she had given Will. She knelt down and scratched Winston behind the ears. A couple more of Will's dogs joined them, waiting to be petted. "Oh, I've missed you guys," Alana said, petting each one in turn.

"You know you never need an excuse to come visit them," Will said.

She looked up at him and smiled. "That's kind. Thank you."

“Is that why you’re here?” he asked. He let his eyes wander over her chocolate brown hair. The sun brought out the copper undertones, and Will found himself wondering if the locks felt as soft as they looked. He took a deep breath and refocused his attention on the dogs that hadn’t joined them and were still frolicking in the yard.

“Actually, no,” Alana said. She finished petting the dogs and stood up again. “I came to see you.”

“Who died?” Will asked, immediately regretting it.

Alana tilted her head and for a moment, Will was reminded of Hannibal. But then she furrowed her brow and her features softened.

“Sorry,” he offered gently. “I spent most of yesterday with Jack.” He left it at that, hoping it was enough of an explanation for Alana.

Either it was or she thought it best to let the subject drop because she simply nodded and said, “I see.”

“So, we’ve established that you’re not here for the dogs or to report a dead body,” Will summed up, offering a smile in the hope that it would dissipate the rest of the awkwardness he felt at the moment.

Alana returned the smile. “I wanted to see how you’re doing.”

Will looked down at Winston who had trotted over to him. He patted the dog on the head. “Wanting to make sure my hallucinations are gone?”

“Are they?”

Will looked at her for a moment and then nodded.

“I’m more curious about how your return to work is going.”

Will snorted, grinning awkwardly at the snow-covered trees over Alana’s shoulder. “Have you and Hannibal been discussing things?”

Alana’s brow furrowed briefly but then smoothed out. She smiled. “Is it surprising that we are both concerned about our friend?”

“Not at all. What would be a little surprising – and possibly unethical – is if my psychiatrist were discussing me with a mutual friend.”

“Hannibal and I have not been discussing you, Will.”

“Great,” Will uttered. Although, he was less concerned with ethics and more uncomfortable at the thought that his friends might be sharing musings about Will behind his back.

“I knew you had gone back to work.” Her voice was soft as she spoke. “I simply wanted to check in and see how you were doing, Will. That’s all.”

He met her gaze and nodded. After a few moments, he asked, “Would you like to come inside?”

Will led Alana into the house. The dogs stayed outside and he showed her to a seat in the front room. He took her coat and hung both of theirs by the door. Then he made a fresh pot of coffee and returned to the sitting room. He handed her a mug full, steam rolling off the top, and sat down across from her.

“Thank you, Will.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So, we talked a bit about why I had come by. But you never did answer.”

“How I’m doing?” Will inhaled sharply. “About as good as could be expected.”

“That’s what I was worried about,” she answered.

He looked up, a bit surprised by her honesty. “But the encephalitis should be gone by now, so things could be worse.”

“Things could also be better. I’m not sure, with your gifts, that you should be in the field.”

“My gifts are exactly the reason Jack wants me in the field.”

“And exactly the reason you shouldn’t be.”

“You will have to take that up with him.” Will sipped his coffee. “Doctor Crawford doesn’t listen to me.”

“Doctor Crawford?”

Will shook his head.

“I know you are helping people, Will, and that’s great. But you were sick for several weeks. And you just got over that. I think you need more time to heal before you expose yourself to that world again.”

“I’m not arguing with you.”

Alana stared at Will, her sparkling blue eyes appearing icy. “You have a choice, Will. Jack is not your boss, technically speaking.”

“I’m aware.” Will took another sip of his coffee, just to have something to do.

“How does Hannibal feel about this?” she asked.

“Hannibal has always been against me being in the field.”

Alana cocked an eyebrow. “I agree.”

Will gave her a wry smile. “Back around the time Hannibal and I first met, he said something to me.”

When Will hesitated, Alana urged. “What did he say?”

“He told me that Jack thinks I’m a delicate piece of China.” Will snorted. “I asked how Hannibal saw me. He had a very different perspective. But now…”

Alana’s eyebrows rose. “Now?”

“Now, I’m beginning to wonder if Hannibal isn’t the one who has seen me as a delicate piece of fine China all along.”

“You are strong, Will, and Hannibal knows that. But that doesn’t mean he wants to see you taken advantage of.”

“Is that why everyone’s so worried about me?” Will smirked. “Because of my strength?”

“We’re concerned because we’re your friends.” Alana took a sip of her coffee. “But that doesn’t mean that you’re not strong.”

Will stared down into the muddy liquid in his mug. “Thanks for coming by,” he said after several moments. When he looked up, Alana wore a crooked smile.

“Is that my cue to leave?”

“Not at all.” Will smiled. “I am simply expressing my gratitude.”

Alana stayed for a while longer. The two sat and discussed their jobs, hobbies, friends, and life in general. It wasn’t until the sun had started to set that Alana smiled gently at Will and said that it was probably time for her to leave.

Will felt a small pang in his stomach, but he didn’t let it show. He let her go without a fight, happy for the visit and assuming she had other things to get to. She handed him the coffee mug and retrieved her coat from the rack by the door. Then she petted each dog in turn – Will had let them back inside several minutes earlier – and told Will goodbye. She gave him a hug and then he set her mug down on the desk, grabbed his coat, and walked her outside. He stayed on the porch as she walked to her car and drove away.

When her car was out of sight, he turned back towards the house and went inside.

Chapter 7

Will ambled around the expansive sitting room, eyeing the décor on the walls and the framed photos on the mantel. Jack sat patiently on the sofa nearby. Mrs. Stanton had let the two of them into the three-story home fifteen minutes earlier. She had offered a cup of tea to each of them. Jack had taken her up on the offer, but Will had refused. She made the single cup of tea, and Jack sat and drank it while they waited.

They weren't there to see Mrs. Stanton. They had shown up to interview her husband, Professor Marcus Stanton from the University of Maryland, but he hadn't yet arrived home. Mrs. Stanton had called him to track his whereabouts and determined that he was only a few minutes away. Jack had said they would wait.

It was Will and Jack's eighth interview in two days. They had found relatively nothing useful from the previous meetings with Margaret Filch's professors and classmates. One of them had told them about the same rumor they had already heard – that Margaret had possibly been cheating on her boyfriend – but no other useful information had been provided.

The mantel clock above the fireplace chimed. Will glanced at it: 5:00. Will wondered if Mrs. Stanton's phone call to her husband had possibly tipped him off and he had decided not to return home. Will was about to voice his concern to Jack when he heard a faint door slam from outside.

"Oh, that should be him," Mrs. Stanton said as she whizzed past the doorway towards the front of the house.

Will heard faint voices – Mrs. Stanton probably informing her husband that the FBI was there to ask him some questions about the recent murder. Then, a few moments later, Mr. Stanton appeared in the entryway and rounded the corner to the sitting room. He wore a long woolen overcoat with a gray scarf bundled tightly around his neck. Will turned to face him as Jack set his teacup on the coffee table and got to his feet.

"Agent Crawford," Jack started. "With the FBI." He extended a hand. Mr. Stanton looked at it, hesitating, and then took it, giving it a shake. "This is Will Graham," Jack continued, gesturing towards Will who lingered near the fireplace, standing a few feet back from the rest of them.

"Marcus Stanton," the man said. "My wife tells me you are here to ask questions about the campus girl who was killed."

"That's right," Jack said. "Margaret Filch."

"Terrible thing," Stanton said, shaking his head. "Although, I'm not sure how much help I can be."

"That's all right. We are interviewing anyone who might have had contact with her. Any information can help."

“Whatever I can do to help,” Stanton said. “Please, let’s step into my office.”

Will refrained from smirking at the cliché phrase. But he followed Jack who followed the professor. They exited the sitting room, entered the two-story foyer and wound through a large hallway until they reached a wooden door. The professor opened the door and stepped inside, holding the door for Jack and Will. The two of them walked into the office, which was spacious, with many wooden decorations, several bookshelves of books, and many cultural pieces decorating the space. It reminded Will of Hannibal’s office.

“Have a seat,” Stanton said, waving towards the two black leather chairs that sat in front of a wide, heavy-looking wooden desk.

Jack walked over to the chairs and took a seat. Will lingered behind, looking around the room and taking in his surroundings. He had never been in this man’s home, let alone his office, but the room looked familiar somehow. There was a drink cart to the right, nestled between two tall bookshelves, and on the floor in the open space of the room was a large, dark, blue-and-gold ornate rug. It wasn’t unlike the rugs he had seen in Hannibal’s home and office, but there was something off about it.

“Mr. Graham?”

Will’s attention snapped from the rug to the professor. Will lifted his eyebrows.

“May I offer you a drink?”

Will shook his head. “No, thank you. I already declined your wife’s offer.”

“Tea?” the professor said with a smile. He nodded. “I can offer something stronger, if you like.”

“No, thank you. Did you know Margaret Filch?”

The professor opened his mouth to speak but then looked somewhat startled. Perhaps he hadn’t been expecting Will to jump straight into questioning. The professor recovered quickly, however, and offered a wry smile.

“Not well. I had her in a couple different classes this year and last.”

“Which classes?”

“Ancient Greek art and culture.”

“She was really into Grecian art, wasn’t she?” Will asked.

Professor Stanton shrugged. “About as much as the rest of my students, I suppose.”

Will shook his head. He walked to a bookshelf and let his eyes scan over some of the titles. They were on subjects like European history, art, and philosophy. Will smirked. Very much like Hannibal’s office, indeed.

“No,” Will finally said. “Her dorm room was decorated with all things Greek. Photos of Greece, books on Greece, trinkets and replicas of Grecian art and ruins. Is that typical of your students?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Professor Stanton answered. He moved around behind the wide desk and sat down in the high-backed leather chair, swiveling to clasp his hands on the surface of the desk. He smiled at Will, but the expression was tight. Not genuine. “I’m not exactly privy to the décor inside my students’ dorm rooms.”

“So you didn’t know Margaret Filch outside of class,” Jack said.

“Only as much as any of my students.”

“And how much is that?” Jack asked.

Stanton sat back in his chair and spread his hands. “Some students need a little help. I don’t make my classes easy on them. But my door is always open to those students who need extra assistance.”

“Did Margaret Filch ever take advantage of that open-door policy?” Jack asked.

The professor hesitated. Will watched the way his jaw tightened. Then, he gently said, “Yes, she did.”

“Do you know of anyone who would have wanted to hurt her?” Will asked.

“Of course not. But as I’ve said,” he added, grabbing a pen from the edge of his desk and fidgeting with it. “I didn’t know her that well.”

“Was she ever in your home?” Will asked.

The professor looked at Will, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. His jaw continued to clench and unclench, and Will thought the professor looked as if he might want to use the pen he was holding as a weapon. Stanton looked at Jack then. Will was at the edge of the room but almost directly behind Jack. He couldn’t see Jack’s expression, but the way the professor slammed his pen down on his desk, Will assumed Jack was waiting for an answer just as Will was.

“No,” the professor said.

“Your house is pretty warm,” Will said.

“What?”

“We’ve been here about twenty minutes or so, and I’m already sweating in my coat.”

“That’s...” The professor shook his head, furrowing his brow. “You may take your coat off,” the man said, sort of shrugging as though he were unsure if that’s what Will was getting at.

“Sure,” Will said. “I didn’t expect we’d stay here very long.”

Professor Stanton looked back and forth between Will and Jack. “Is there a point to this?”

Jack even turned in his seat enough to look over his shoulder at Will. Will kept his focus on the professor, nodding at him. “Are you planning to go somewhere else?”

The professor narrowed his eyes. After several moments, he said, “No.”

“So, what’s your excuse for remaining bundled up?”

“What?” the man asked. He looked at Jack and shook his head. “Is he serious?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s always serious,” Jack answered.

Will refrained from smirking. “Take your coat off, Professor Stanton.” He tilted his head. “Stay a while.”

“I’m fine,” the man said curtly.

“How about the scarf?” Will lifted an eyebrow. “Care to take that off?”

The professor shook his head. “Are we finished here?” He rolled his chair back from his desk. “I have a lot of work to do.”

“This is a very interesting rug,” Will said, staring down at the blue rectangle beneath his feet.

“Thank you.” Professor Stanton got to his feet.

“But I must say, it doesn’t really go with the rest of the room.”

“What, do you moonlight as an interior decorated or something?”

“It looks new,” Will said.

Jack rose from his chair and turned so that he could see both the professor and Will. He looked at the rug.

“It is,” the professor said. “Agent,” he snipped. “What is this?”

Will stepped off the rug and then knelt down.

“What are you doing?” The professor whipped around the side of the desk, headed towards Will.

Jack stepped into his path, arms out. “Just a minute, professor.”

Will grabbed the corner of the rug and tossed one end back on itself. The hardwood floor beneath was revealed, and Will wasn’t at all surprised to see long scratch marks dug into the wood. He looked up at Jack.

“Very interesting scratch marks, professor,” Jack said.

Stanton gestured wildly at the floor. “That’s from moving furniture. I scratched the floor and had to put a rug down until I can get it fixed.”

“I’m interested to know what piece of furniture in this room caused those very specific scratch marks.” Will made a show of looking around the room as though trying to pinpoint the culprit piece of furniture.

The man glowered at Will. “I believe it’s time for you two to leave.”

Will stood up, leaving the rug folded back on itself. “Take off your scarf, Professor Stanton.”

“No,” the man barked. “We are finished here.”

“That’s fine,” Jack answered.

Will was about to protest when Jack continued.

“We’ll just go get a quick warrant and come back and run some DNA tests on this floor.”

The man’s eyes went wide but only for a fraction of a second. “There’s no need for that.”

“No?” Jack said.

The man shook his head.

“Please remove your scarf, professor,” Will repeated.

Stanton sighed and grabbed one end of the scarf. He began to unravel it but before his neck – and the scratches Will suspected were there – was revealed, the professor dropped the end of the scarf and bolted for the door.

Will and Jack pulled their guns from their holsters and pursued the professor. Will was out the door first, catching a glimpse of Stanton as he rounded a corner towards the back of the house. Will ran after him, sidling up to the wall before rounding the same corner. When he poked his head around, Stanton was standing in the kitchen. Will recognized the black metal piece in his hand, and as he quickly retreated, a gunshot rang out, and the edge of the wall splintered next to his face.

Will waited, listening to hear Stanton’s footsteps. But he heard nothing. Assuming Stanton was still in the kitchen, waiting for Will to round the corner so he could blow his head off, Will had to come up with a new plan. He looked to his right, seeing Jack push off the wall just a few feet from him. Jack made a circle gesture with his hand that Will assumed meant the agent was going to go around and try to come at Stanton from a different direction. Will nodded.

Jack turned and hurried down the hall, disappearing around a corner. Will turned back to the splintered doorway.

“Mr. Stanton, this isn’t how you want things to go.”

“You have no idea how I want things to go!” the professor yelled.

At least now Will knew he was still in the kitchen.

“My partner and I don’t want to shoot you, but we will if we have to.”

“You do what you have to do, and I’ll do what I have to do and—”

“Put the gun down,” Jack’s voice cut off the professor.

Will peered around the corner. Jack stood behind the professor, aiming the gun at his head. Marcus Stanton had his gun in hand, but the muzzle was pointed down towards the floor. Will eased around the corner and walked into the kitchen. He kept his gun aimed at the professor while the latter put his gun on the counter and Jack put him in handcuffs. Then, Will tucked his weapon back in its holster and retrieved the gun the professor had used to nearly take Will’s head off.

“I wasn’t the one who killed her,” the professor said.

Will used his free hand to tug Stanton’s scarf loose. When it was free, he tossed it on the counter, eyeing the three long scratches along the side of the professor’s neck.

“Are you sure you want to stick to that story?”

“Yes,” he said. “I didn’t kill her.”

“Then, who did?”

The professor said nothing but his eyes flitted to something over Will’s shoulder. Will turned around and saw a framed photo hanging on the kitchen wall. It was the professor in a tux and his wife in a wedding gown. They were posed in front of a cabin that was surrounded by woods.

Will raised his eyebrows as he returned his attention to the professor. “Your wife?”

The man said nothing, but Will saw the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as he looked at the floor.

“Where is she?” Jack said, looking at Will.

“How the hell should I know?” Stanton answered, apparently thinking the question had been directed towards him.

Will tucked Stanton’s gun away and retrieved his own from its holster. He made his way through the house, clearing room after room, floor after floor. Finding nothing, he assumed Mrs. Stanton had made her getaway while Will and Jack had interviewed her husband.

“It’s clear, Jack,” Will called as he headed back downstairs. As he reached the landing in the entryway, Jack rounded the corner, ushering Stanton in front of him.

Jack took the professor out to his car in the semi-circle drive and tucked him into the back seat. When he closed the door, he turned to Will.

“I’ll take him in and see what he can tell us about his wife. Maybe he has some idea of where she would have gone.”

“You think he’ll rat her out?”

“She left him to take the heat. I’ll work that angle.”

“Let me know when you need me,” Will said, walking back to his own vehicle.

“Will do.” Jack got into his car and drove away with the professor in the back.

Will pulled out behind them and followed for a couple of miles before veering off towards the city.

Chapter 8

Will was on the road, headed to Hannibal's house for dinner. He had had plenty of time to run home and shower – and change into fresh clothing, not that the ones he had worn all day smelled of rotting corpses that time around – before he had to leave. He even made up a new batch of food from scratch for the dogs and fed them before heading out.

The sun had gone down shortly after leaving his house, so the majority of the drive was in the dark. As he approached the city, he noticed headlights unusually large and bright in his mirrors. He tried to make out the color of the car, but it was too dark to see. He had no idea if it was the same person who had been following him or if it was just some jerk who had decided to tailgate.

He checked the clock on the dash and, figuring he had a little bit of extra time, pulled into the nearest parking lot. It was a twenty-four-hour drug store and somewhat busy. Will found an empty space and pulled in, his car facing the road out front. He waited, watching as several cars drove past. The street lights illuminated the area enough that he could see the color of each and every one.

None looked familiar. He stayed put for a few more minutes but, not seeing a single car that resembled the one that had been following him before, he chalked the night's incident up to a random tailgater. He put his car in gear and backed out. But as he reached the parking lot exit, a car cruised past, going much more slowly than the rest of the traffic. It was a four-door sedan. And dark blue.

As it passed the parking lot, Will pulled out onto the road. He followed the car, somewhat relieved when he realized it was headed in the direction of Hannibal's house. At least it wouldn't cost him anymore time to follow it. He thought that was convenient.

Or possibly too convenient. Had the person known where Will was headed?

Will continued to follow the car, but after several minutes, it turned. Will followed it away from the busiest part of the city, making a circuitous path as they continued to drive in the direction of Hannibal's house. As they reached a more secluded area where the road was surrounded not by buildings or houses but trees, Will grew more suspicious.

Then the car sped up.

Will tried to keep up, but the other car had much more pick-up. Before long, the car was pulling away, and Will let off the gas.

They had taken a different route than what Will had planned – or usually took – but Will knew where he was and he knew he could still get to Hannibal's if he stayed on his current route. So he didn't need to turn around. He continued on, watching the dark blue car's tail lights grow smaller in front of him.

But then the car stopped. Will continued driving, watching as the car did a three-point turn and whipped around to face Will. Then the car sped forward. Will let off the gas to slow down. He didn't want to stop completely in case he needed to swerve.

The car continued forward and then veered into Will's lane.

"Shit," Will muttered. He stepped on the gas and swerved into the other lane. The other car swerved too.

Will was about to slam on the brakes and throw the car into reverse, but the dark blue car was approaching too quickly. As the car reached him, he jerked the wheel to the side. His car zoomed off the road and down a small hill before slamming head-on into a tree.

The sound of crunching metal and shattering glass was deafening. Will felt stinging against his cheek and then the airbag deployed just as Will's face nearly slammed into the steering wheel. The force of the air bag knocked Will back, making his head and neck feel as though they were attached to a bungee cord. He rested his head back against the head rest and caught his breath, mentally checking his injuries.

He could still feel the pressure of his seat belt against his chest but it didn't hurt. His neck and head just felt a little uneasy from the whiplash. The left side of his face stung. He put a hand to it, but it only increased the pain. He pulled his hand away, taking note of the smear of red on his palm.

His arms and legs felt all right, if just a bit sore from tensing up. He unfastened his seatbelt and pulled his keys from the ignition. Then he tried the door handle. The door wouldn't open. He crawled over the center console and tried the passenger door. It wouldn't open either. He then crawled between the seats to the back where he tried the passenger side back door. It opened and Will practically fell to the ground as he crawled out. He got to his feet and leaned back against the car.

As he caught his breath, he looked up to the road. The dark blue car was nowhere in sight. He fished his cell phone from his pocket, deciding to call Hannibal to come get him. The screen remained black. His phone was dead.

Will tucked his phone back into his pocket, pushed off the car, and went to the trunk. He fit his key into the lock and then popped the lid up. He found a flashlight in the trunk and closed the lid. Then, he walked up the small hill to the road side. He looked up and down the street but there was no sign of the car. There was no sign of anyone at all.

Will flicked on the flashlight, turned in the direction of Hannibal's house, and began walking.

Chapter 9

Hannibal pulled up his sleeve to check his watch for the third time in less than thirty minutes. Dinner was nearly finished, and Will had yet to make an appearance. Hannibal had received Will's response to the invitation, confirming that he would arrive at seven that evening. It was nearly eight, and there had been no sign of Will.

Hannibal had considered the possibility that Will was simply running late. It would be an unusual occurrence for the younger man, but sometimes unavoidable things presented themselves. However, what made Hannibal uneasy was the fact that he had received no call from Will informing Hannibal that he would be delayed.

Hannibal made his way to his study. He sat down behind his desk, checking his watch a fourth time. He retrieved his phone and tapped the screen until a pulsing sound came from the other end. He waited for Will to answer. After a single pulse, he heard the younger man's voice.

You've reached Will Graham's voicemail. Leave a message.

Brevity and bluntness. Two of Will's strong suits. But it didn't help Hannibal discern why his friend was so late. Hannibal ended the call without leaving a message.

The doctor adjusted the items on his desk. He centered his planner, straightened a letter opener, and lined up a pen so that it was perfectly perpendicular to the edge of the desk. The last time Will had been late was when he had had a hallucination due to his encephalitis. Will had recently been treated for his illness and had spent a couple of weeks recovering. Hannibal wondered if those symptoms had not entirely gone away. Will insisted days earlier that he had been consistently taking his medication. If that were the truth, he should not be experiencing hallucinations and lost time. At least, not from encephalitis. But Hannibal had never been around Will when he had taken his medication. He could not confirm, for certain, whether the younger man had been consistent with it or not. However, Will did smell different to Hannibal lately. The fevered sweetness that had radiated from Will due to his disease had lessened since his hospital visit, but it had not completely vanished.

The stove timer emitted a beep that Hannibal easily heard across his house. He pushed his chair back and got to his feet. As he made his way to the kitchen, he rolled up his sleeves. He turned off the timer and donned the two oven mitts he had placed on the counter top. He opened the oven door and removed the dish of braised pork loins. He placed it on the counter, watching the steam roll off the surface as he inhaled deeply. He closed the oven door and removed his mitts, debating whether to eat alone or track down Will. He had not yet come to a decision when he heard the doorbell ring.

Hannibal wound his way through the house until he reached the front door. When he pulled it open, Will stood on the other side. A smile played on Hannibal's lips, relieved that Will had finally arrived, until he noticed the lacerations on the side of his face and the blood trickling from above his eyebrow.

“Will?”

“Sorry I’m late,” Will offered.

Hannibal debated reaching for Will but decided against it. He stepped aside to let Will in and asked, “What happened?”

“I was run off the road.” Will put a gentle hand to the side of his face as he walked inside. He grimaced and let his hand fall away. “I hit a tree.”

“Are you bleeding anywhere besides your face?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Are you hurting anywhere else?”

Will shook his head. “Not really.”

Hannibal tilted his head. “Not really? Or no?”

“No.”

“Come with me,” Hannibal said. He reached out that time and gently took Will’s elbow. He ushered him to his office door. Hannibal opened it and let Will go in first. Hannibal waved at the chaise lounge perched on the ornate Persian rug. “Have a seat.” Will followed his instruction and sat down. “I will be right back.”

When Will nodded, Hannibal left the room. He went to the bathroom where he kept his medical kit. When he returned to the office, Will was seated where the doctor had left him, but he had removed his jacket which lay draped over the back of the lounge.

“Are you dizzy?” Hannibal asked.

“No.”

“Nauseated?”

“No.”

Hannibal set his kit down on the lounge beside Will. He retrieved the glass table beside one of the chairs in the room and set it down in front of the lounge. He pulled over the trash can from beneath his desk, set his medical kit on top of the table, and took a seat beside Will.

“How did this happen?” Hannibal asked. He opened the kit and found a bottle of peroxide and a small container of cotton swabs, pulling them out and setting them on the table.

“I was being followed.” Will looked up at him then, and Hannibal could read the question in his eyes.

Hannibal nodded without answering. He unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves, donning a pair of latex gloves. He opened the container of cotton swabs and pulled one out. He uncapped the bottle of peroxide and soaked the swab in the liquid. He turned towards Will on the lounge and asked, "Was it the same vehicle as before?"

Will nodded but abruptly stopped when Hannibal took Will's jaw in his hand. Hannibal maneuvered the younger man's head, turning it away from him so he could get a good look at the cuts on the side of his face. There were half a dozen, not including the larger gash above his eye. Hannibal went to work cleaning the wounds.

"I don't know when the car started following me," Will said after a few seconds.

Hannibal touched the end of the cotton swab to the cut above the younger man's eye. The white fabric was immediately soaked red.

"I pulled off and let him pass. Then, I started to follow him."

"Where did he go?"

"Nowhere in particular. He just kept driving. But he noticed me following because he pulled a U-turn and drove at me."

Hannibal looked from the wound to Will's eyes. They stared ahead but appeared unfocused. A moment later, Will looked at Hannibal.

"I had nowhere to go and ended up driving off the road. I slammed into a tree."

Hannibal returned his attention to tending to Will's gash. "You are fortunate your injuries were not worse." Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Will was still watching him. He appeared concerned. But not in the way Hannibal would expect. He didn't seem concerned for his own well-being but rather concerned about what Hannibal thought. And in all honesty, Hannibal wasn't sure what he thought.

Will had certainly sustained an injury. Hannibal could tell the lacerations were from something small and sharp – most likely glass. But the reason for the collision was not certain. At least, not in Hannibal's mind.

"Do you believe me?" Will whispered as though reading Hannibal's thoughts.

"I believe that you were in an accident, yes."

Will shook his head, and Hannibal stopped dabbing at a cut. "That's not what I mean."

Hannibal waited.

"Do you believe that someone ran me off the road?"

Hannibal met his gaze again. "Do you?"

"Yes," Will answered quickly.

Hannibal watched his face. “You do not seem certain.”

Will sighed and dropped his gaze to the floor. “The result of months of hallucinations, I suppose.”

Hannibal resumed tending to Will’s facial wounds. “Whatever has caused it,” he began, “I do not like this result.”

Will smirked. “You and me both.”

Hannibal finished cleaning the cuts a short time later. He disposed of the cotton swabs and retrieved a tube of antibiotic ointment from his kit. He applied it to Will’s cuts before putting it away and getting out a few butterfly bandages. He tightly closed Will’s wounds and applied the bandages. When he had finished, he cleaned off the table and removed his gloves, tossing them into the trash.

“I do not want you driving home this evening,” he said.

“I’m fine, Hannibal. I don’t—”

“You will stay here tonight.”

“That’s really not necessary.”

Hannibal tilted his head. “Doctor’s orders.”

Will snorted a quiet laugh. “I’m really okay.”

“It is not up for debate.”

Will shook his head but said, “I guess I can sleep on the couch.”

“You will sleep in the guest bedroom.”

“Fine,” Will muttered.

“In the meantime, we can start dinner.”

“I’m not sure how hungry I—” He stopped when Hannibal narrowed his eyes. “On the other hand, dinner sounds great.”

Hannibal smiled. “Stay here and relax while I go re-heat it. I will return for you in a few minutes.”

When Will agreed, Hannibal returned the table and trash can to their rightful locations. He took his medical kit back to the bathroom and went to the kitchen. He tested the food, but it had cooled too much to be edible, so he slid it back into the oven and set the timer. Then, he returned to his study to keep Will company.

Chapter 10

Will remained seated on the chaise lounge in Hannibal's study, waiting for the latter to return. He rested his head back and closed his eyes. His head ached, and the cuts on his face throbbed. He didn't feel much like eating, but he knew the doctor wouldn't have it any other way.

He wasn't sure Hannibal believed him. That someone had run him off the road and caused his wreck and injuries. Will wanted to be indignant about that, but he couldn't exactly blame the doctor. Will had been plagued by hallucinations for most of the time Hannibal had known him. But Will hated that that was how Hannibal knew him. Besides, Will was certain that what he had experienced was real. Or mostly certain, anyway.

"Will?"

He opened his eyes, his body feeling unusually heavy and tired. Hannibal stood over him but took a seat beside him a moment later. He lifted his hand, and Will saw that he held something but couldn't discern what it was. Then, there was a soft click and a light shone from the device in Hannibal's hand.

"Look at me."

Will looked up at Hannibal's face. The doctor lifted the light and shined it in Will's eye. Will squinted. Hannibal lowered the light and then, a moment later, shined it in Will's other eye. He lowered the light again and clicked it off.

"How's it look, doc?"

"Your pupils are reacting normally."

"That's good."

"I would, however, like for you to go to the hospital."

"What about dinner?" Will asked. "You seemed very intent on feeding me a few minutes ago."

Hannibal smiled. "We can eat when we return."

"I'm fine, Hannibal."

Hannibal tilted his head, fixing Will with an admonishing stare.

"What? I am. You said so yourself."

"That is not what I said."

"You said I'm normal." Will smirked. "Well, that my eyes are anyway."

Hannibal offered a gentle smile. "It is merely a precaution."

"I'm not going to the hospital, Hannibal."

"Will."

"No. I'm fine. It's just a few scratches. And you've already tended to those. I'll eat dinner and I'll stay here tonight, both per your request, but that's it."

Hannibal stared at him for a few moments. Will stared back.

After several silent moments, Hannibal said, "Very well."

Will nodded and then rested his head back again, closing his eyes.

"How many times have you seen the vehicle following you?"

Will opened his eyes. "A few."

"And the first time was when?"

"When I told you about it before."

"Right after you went back into the field."

Will hesitated and then quietly said, "Yes."

"The same day, in fact."

"Yes," Will said, letting out a sigh. He kept his head against the back of the lounge but swiveled it enough to look at Hannibal. "I know what you're getting at."

"I am concerned for you, Will."

"Because there's someone following me and possibly trying to hurt or kill me? Or because you think I'm nuts?"

"I don't think you're nuts."

"But you believe it's a possibility."

"No."

"Not that I'm nuts. But that I hallucinated all of it."

"It would not be the first time you've hallucinated."

"It would be the first time I've hallucinated when it wasn't caused by a serious illness."

"Hence my concern for you."

“So, that’s it, then?”

Hannibal tilted his head, the question in his eyes.

“You’re just convinced that that’s what it was. It couldn’t possibly be that someone is actually following me.”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.” Will sat forward. “On second thought, I’m not sure I feel much like eating tonight. And I can call Alana to come get me.”

Hannibal’s hand was around his wrist before Will was able to get to his feet. The grip was tight but not uncomfortable.

Will looked down at the doctor’s slender fingers and then up at his face. “What?”

“Will, I am convinced of nothing.”

Will lifted his eyebrows, waiting for an explanation.

“Nothing but the fact that you were injured tonight.”

Will sighed.

“Whether it was because of a hallucination, or what you experienced was real, the result is the same. You are injured. And that concerns me.”

Will sat back and the doctor let go of his wrist.

“Have you encountered the person any other time?”

“No—well, kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“I woke up a few nights ago,” Will said. “I heard noises outside of my house. I grabbed my gun and went to check it out. I didn’t see him – or anyone, for that matter – but there were tracks outside of my house.”

“Tracks.”

“Footprints. Boot prints.” He looked up at Hannibal’s face. It was expressionless, giving away nothing. “There was just a little bit of snow, and there was a boot print right under my bedroom window. I think someone had been there right before I went outside. That had to have been the noises I heard.”

“Why did you not say anything before now?”

“Because you act like I’m crazy.”

“Will, I apologize if I have made you feel that way. You are far from crazy.”

“Maybe not quite as far as you think.”

“Have there been any other incidents?”

Will shook his head. “Just that one. And I checked again the next morning, but it had snowed overnight. The boot print was gone by the time I looked again.”

“The next time something happens, I would like for you to call me immediately.”

Will looked up, searching Hannibal’s face. He wanted to ask why but couldn’t form the word. He didn’t think he wanted to know. Either Hannibal wanted to help find the person following Will, or he wanted to help Will through yet another hallucination. Will wasn’t sure he was ready to know which one of those scenarios Hannibal felt would be reality.

Instead of questioning the doctor, Will let his gaze fall and quietly said, “Okay.”

Chapter 11

Will tailed the line of law enforcement vehicles through the secluded wilderness a ways away from the city. It was late afternoon but the trees on either side of the one-lane road provided a canopy which blocked out the sun and made it appear much later.

Jack's vehicle was directly in front of Will's rental. Hannibal had had his car towed and had driven Will to the rental lot. Will was determined to get a new car as soon as possible, but he was stuck with a rental for the next few days.

Jack had questioned Will about the rental car earlier in the day, and Will had simply told him his own car was out of commission. He hadn't wanted to get into the details – or the truth – with Jack. The agent had stared at Will, eyeing his facial lacerations. When he had asked about those, Will muttered something about a shaving mishap. Jack stared at him for the longest time. Will avoided his gaze, sure the agent was going to grill him about his injuries. But much to Will's surprise, Jack had let it go.

An hour after leaving Jack's office, the law enforcement caravan reached its destination – a small cabin surrounded by woods. A cabin which Will had seen before in pictures. In one picture, to be exact. The photo in Professor Stanton's kitchen of him and his wife.

It had taken Professor Stanton all of ten minutes to roll over on his wife. Jack had worked the angle he had said he would, convincing the professor that his wife had taken off in order to free herself and let her husband take the fall. He had made a deal and then told Jack everything that had happened.

Professor Stanton and Margaret Filch had been having an affair. His wife had found out and had demanded that he end it. He had agreed, planning to tell Margaret at school. But she had shown up at his home with news of her own – she was pregnant. Mrs. Stanton had overheard the conversation and decided to take matters into her own hands. When Professor Stanton left the room to get Margaret a glass of water, his wife had snuck in and attacked her with one of her husband's book end statues. When the professor returned to his study, Margaret was already dead. They disposed of the body and cleaned the study from top to bottom, throwing a rug over the scratch marks in the hardwood until they could get the floor repaired.

Jack showed Professor Stanton photos of Margaret Filch's segmented corpse in the field. He had screeched and teared up, refusing to look at the pictures. When questioned about the way the body was cut into pieces, the professor insisted he knew nothing about it. He claimed that once they had put Margaret in their car, his wife was the one who had driven her away while he stayed behind and cleaned the study.

Jack had expressed his doubt about the wife's ability to drag Margaret's body from the car to the field on her own. But Will wasn't so sure. The husband had seemed truly shocked to see her body mutilated in such a way. Either he hadn't been in that field at all, or he had helped her dispose of the body and she later went back and mutilated Margaret Filch's corpse without her husband's knowledge.

Will believed that that was part of the reason why he was so quick to give up his wife. Will had asked about the cabin, assuming it was a possible location for her to hide out. Professor Stanton told them the location and fifteen minutes later, they were on the road.

Now, the vehicles pulled up in front of the cabin. Sunlight shone down into the clearing, gleaming off the thin layer of snow surrounding the cabin. Jack and the rest of the agents exited their vehicles. Will trailed behind as they approached the place. He lingered on the front porch as they kicked in the door. He could hear the agents yelling “Clear” every few moments. Will rounded the corner of the wraparound porch, watching to see if Mrs. Stanton exited from the back of the cabin. He walked down the side steps of the porch and as snow crunched beneath his feet, he heard a similar sound behind him. But it was faster and getting louder.

Will spun around to see Mrs. Stanton charging towards him. He caught a glint of light just in time to sidestep the knife she wielded. She didn’t stop her approach, coming at him again. He blocked her attempt to stab him and grabbed a hold of her wrist as he reached for his gun. She still had one hand free and swung her fist at him, connecting with his face where he had been cut by the glass during the wreck the night before. It stung more than he ever would have admitted, but he was thankful she didn’t have a knife in that hand as well. He worked his gun free and pointed it at her.

“Get down on the ground.”

She said nothing, just let out a feral growl. He shoved her backwards with his free hand and used both hands to aim the gun at her.

“Get down!”

She didn’t get down. She didn’t surrender at all. She came at him again, knife raised high above her head.

Will squeezed the trigger.

His surroundings went dark, dimly lit only by the moonlight. The snow was deeper, and Will could see it darkening in the distance. He looked up at the moon, expecting to see approaching clouds, but the sky was clear, speckled with bright white stars. He looked at the darkening snow, feeling a sense of impending doom as the darkness neared him. He tried to turn and run but found his feet cemented in the snow again. He had no way out, and as the darkness reached him, he could see that it was not black but red. The snow was soaked through with blood.

There was gentle pressure at his hands, and he looked down to see that he held his gun. But someone else’s hand was on his. He followed the source and saw Jack beside him. It was daylight again and he was surrounded by snow, but it was pristine and white.

He suddenly remembered what he was doing there and looked down at the body of the woman he had shot. His breathing picked up and he started to lift his gun again.

Jack grabbed his wrists tightly and held them down. The gun remained pointed at the ground.

“Let go, Will,” Jack said gently.

Will looked up at his face.

“Let go of the gun.”

Will loosened his grip, and Jack snatched the gun from his grasp.

“I-Is she dead?” Will asked in an unintentional whisper.

“No.”

Will looked at her. She was on her back with a blossom of red on her lower abdomen. Her eyes were closed, but her chest rose and fell with her breaths.

“Is she going to make it?”

“I don’t know, Will. The paramedics are on their way. Come on.” Jack kept Will’s gun in one hand and wrapped his free hand around Will’s bicep.

Will followed Jack’s lead, walking back towards the front of the cabin where the cars were parked. When they reached Will’s rental, Jack stopped and let go of Will’s arm.

Will leaned back against the car, staring down at the dirty, gray snow in front of his feet.

“What happened out there, Will?”

“She was hiding,” Will said. “Under the house. I went around the side and when I walked down the porch steps, she attacked me with a knife.”

“And you shot her.”

Will nodded. “I told her to get on the ground, but she wouldn’t.”

“What was going on when I got to you?”

Will looked up but didn’t meet his gaze. “What do you mean?”

Jack took a step closer and leaned in. “You know what I mean.”

Will shrugged, trying to look as nonchalant as possible. “It’s been a while since I’ve shot someone.”

Jack stared at him, standing a little closer than Will would have preferred. Will met his gaze, holding it for as long as he could before looking away again.

“Fortunately, a shooting requires mandatory therapy sessions.”

“I have one tonight.”

Jack shifted in such a way that Will thought he was trying to get the latter's attention. Will looked up at him again.

Jack's stare was long and intense. After several moments, the agent said, "Good."

Chapter 12

Will checked his face in the mirror when he arrived home. Mrs. Stanton's wild punch had connected with his cheekbone and reopened one of the wounds. It wasn't bad, but Will thought it prudent to tend to the wound. He opened his medicine cabinet and retrieved some supplies, cleaning the cut before putting everything back in place.

As he left the bathroom, he checked the clock on the living room shelf. He had an appointment with Doctor Lecter that evening, but he had some time before he had to leave.

The previous evening had been a chaotic, and slightly awkward, one. The wreck had left him in a bit of a daze, but Hannibal's assessment put him at ease, despite the doctor's insistence that Will visit the hospital. The accident had been enough in Will's opinion, but he had been run off the road by someone who had been following him for days. That had kept Will's nerves on edge the entire evening.

Hannibal had played the good host, however. After the initial questioning and tending to Will's wounds, the doctor mostly let him be for the remainder of the night. They had dinner together, but the conversation had remained casual. At the end of the night, Hannibal had shown Will to the guest bedroom, even leaving a brand new toothbrush in the bathroom for him. Will had thought that he would toss and turn in the guest bed most of the night, but much to his surprise, he had fallen asleep quickly, only waking once during the night after a stag-related nightmare.

Hannibal had fixed a hearty breakfast for the two of them the following morning. And then he had taken Will to get the rental car before they both had to head off to work.

Despite the hectic and draining nature of the previous night, Will was used to a bit of chaos. He was used to being overwhelmed. But something about the night had left Will feeling a little uneasy. Nervous. He tried to convince himself that that was because of his stalker and the wreck, but he wasn't entirely sure that those were the cause of that particular feeling.

In fact, thinking about the wreck and the possibility of a stalker trying to kill him didn't leave him with the same feeling. Sure, he was mentally drained and concerned about those things, but the thought of them didn't cause the flip-flopping nervousness he felt in his stomach. That feeling came when he thought of something else. Someone else.

Will chased the thought from his mind, determined not to dwell on it too long. He removed his gun holster and set it on the table by the chair in the living room. Then, he went to the front door and found half of his dogs waiting on the porch. He opened the door and they filed in. He whistled for the rest and when they were all safely inside the house, Will locked the front door and went to the kitchen to begin making their food.

When he was finished, he dumped the homemade food into the dogs' dishes. He petted them in turn and then took the dirty dishes to the sink. Once the dishes were clean, he went to the living room and took a seat in the arm chair near the window. He eyed the decanter of whiskey nearby. He glanced at the clock and then got to his feet. He still had some time

before he had to leave for his appointment with Doctor Lecter, but he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to go. The events of the previous night had been enough, but the shooting in the afternoon had completely drained Will. He decided he would rather stay home for the evening.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Hannibal's number. He left a quick message, informing the doctor that he wouldn't be able to make it to his appointment. He apologized and ended the call.

There was a glass on the table from the night before. He set his phone down beside it and picked it up. He wiped the glass out with his hand and then trickled half a finger of whiskey into the glass before recapping the decanter. He sat down again and nursed the alcohol.

Winston trotted over to him a few minutes later and sat down beside the chair. Will petted the top of his head in slow, short strokes. When Will's glass was empty, he set it down on the table beside his chair. As the glass thudded gently against the wooden table surface, he heard a second, quieter noise from the other side of the house. He glanced around the room. Most of his dogs had returned, but a couple were still missing. Assuming they had gotten into something in the kitchen, Will got to his feet.

He walked towards the kitchen, glad that the whiskey hadn't affected his motor skills at all. When he reached the kitchen, he found both of the missing dogs. They hadn't gotten into anything, though. In fact, they were both standing in the middle of the floor, staring up at a dark figure in front of the counter. Buster growled as Will spun on his heels and ran for the living room. Before he could reach the gun he had left on the table, he was attacked from behind.

Chapter 13

When Will came to, his vision was blurry. He could just make out the dirt floor beneath him, the table in front of him, and the wooden walls around him. Slivers of dim light pierced through the cracks in the walls. Will couldn't see outside, but he didn't need to. He knew where he was. He was tied to a support beam in his own shed.

A rope was pulled tightly around his chest and woven around his arms, securing him tightly to the beam. His ankles were bound together by the same type of rope. He wore no jacket and the sleeves of his flannel shirt were rolled up to his elbows. He didn't remember doing that himself. He tried to pull his arms free, but it was difficult to move. He glanced around the shed, looking for anything that might assist in freeing him from the restraints. His eyes only came to a rest when he spotted a dark figure in the corner of the shed. He could make out no discerning features, but he thought it safe to assume that it was the same figure who had been inside his house.

Will stared at the dark shadow until it moved. A moment later, the lantern near the front of the shed was illuminated. Then the figure grew closer, carrying the light. As he neared, Will began to make out some features.

He didn't recognize the man. But something about the broad jaw, narrow eyes, and slightly too high forehead seemed familiar to Will.

"Should I even ask what you want?" Will said.

The man reached the table that was only a couple feet in front of Will. He set the lantern down and turned to Will, smiling. A chill went down Will's spine. That emotionless smile was also familiar.

"That answer is fairly simple," the man said. His voice was low and smooth. Calculated.

Not a good sign, Will thought. "And what is that fairly simple answer?"

"Revenge, mostly."

"If you really wanted to kill me—"

"Don't say that I would have done it already." The man stepped forward and crouched down in front of Will. He would have been within reach if Will's arms had been free. "Because believe me, Mr. Graham, I really want to kill you."

Will waited. Whether it was for an explanation or an attack, Will wasn't sure.

"However," the man began. He reached behind him and, a moment later, his hand emerged holding a knife.

Will recognized the worn wooden handle. It was one of Will's kitchen knives. His stomach tightened at the sight of it.

"This can't look like a murder," the man said. "And I've heard through the expansive grapevine, that one pseudo-agent Will Graham has experienced significant breaks in reality."

Will smirked. "You've been following me for a while."

"Longer than I think you realize."

Will stared at the man. He had only noticed someone following him a few days earlier, after leaving the crime scene of Margaret Filch in the overgrown field.

"And I believe that it wouldn't be so far-fetched to believe that someone with your ailment may grow tired of living such a life."

"Perhaps you haven't been following me as closely as you should have been," Will said.

"Oh, I have kept very close."

Will smirked. "Then, you probably already know that I have been treated for my hallucinations."

The other man smiled broadly. "Mr. Graham, treatments only work properly if you are consistent with the medications that are meant to help you."

Will's stomach tightened. How could he know how consistent Will had been with his medications? Unless...

"Today was not the first time you were in my house, was it?"

"No. And I must say, you have a very loving pack of dogs."

Will's jaw began to hurt, and he realized he was clenching it. "I swear, if you—"

"Please, Mr. Graham, don't strain yourself. Besides, I have nothing against dogs."

Will had no reason to believe the man's words, but the statement made him feel better nonetheless. He tried not to worry about his dogs. They were in the house, away from this madman. Will knew he should be more concerned about himself.

"So, what exactly are you wanting revenge for?"

"Have you ever had someone come into your life abruptly and steal away the one person you cared for?"

Will hesitated. "I can't say that I have."

"My first inclination was to see to it that you experienced just that. But I have been following you for weeks now, Mr. Graham, and despite the few people you have encountered, there

seems to be no one with whom you are incredibly close. Mostly acquaintances. But it seems that your job is your main focus. The thing that you love the most.”

Will thought about all the mutilated bodies he had had to encounter. All of the gruesome crime scenes. All of the nightmares and sleepless nights. Will smirked. “I wouldn’t exactly say that I love it.”

“It is, however, the thing you don’t seem to be able to avoid.” The man lifted the knife and stared at it, turning it over in his hand.

Will saw his own reflection in the steel blade. “So, you plan to take that from me?”

The man looked at him and smiled. “Me? No. I won’t be taking that from you.”

Will waited for clarification.

The man pointed the knife at Will. “You will take that from yourself.”

“How exactly will I do that?”

“I doubt the FBI will continue to consult with a pseudo-agent who has attempted to kill himself.”

Will eyed the blade. “Attempted,” Will repeated. “So, you do not plan to actually kill me, then.”

The man offered a casual shrug. “Eventually, yes. But I would love to see you suffer first.”

Will felt his heart thump in his chest. He tried to keep his breathing under control but began to find it difficult.

“How exactly do you plan to pull this off?”

A smile spread across the man’s face. “I am so glad you asked.”

The man sidled up next to Will, behind his left arm. He reached forward and took Will’s forearm in his hand. Will tried to pull free, but the man had a vice-like grip, and the ropes kept Will from gaining any leverage.

“If you do this—”

“There is no if to this,” the man assured him.

“—there is no guarantee that I won’t bleed out right here and now. You may not get to see me suffer at all.”

“That is a risk I am willing to take. And let’s face it, Mr. Graham, I would not be broken hearted to see you die right now.”

Will struggled against the ropes. He tried to shift his body enough to kick at the man beside him, but with his feet bound, the motion was awkward and unsuccessful. The man held the knife out, slowly inching it closer to Will's wrist. Will tried to pull free, but it was no use.

"How's the angle? It looks fairly self-induced, wouldn't you say?"

Will didn't answer, and the man held the cold, steel blade against Will's wrist. Will panted heavily, groaning as the point dug into his skin. A droplet of blood appeared, and then the man pressed more firmly. Will cried out as the man slowly sliced down Will's wrist. Blood streamed from the wound, covering his wrist and hand. Blood trickled from his skin, pooling on the dirt floor beside him.

The pain was significant, but what worried Will more was the sheer amount of blood leaving the wound. Will wouldn't last long if the bleeding didn't stop. And he didn't think the man would stop it. But Will couldn't stop it himself. He didn't know how the man would see Will suffer for more than a few minutes with that particular plan.

The man moved behind Will, disappearing from sight. A moment later, he reappeared on Will's other side. He switched the knife to his left hand, and grabbed Will's right arm. Will tugged as hard as he could. His arm slipped from the man's grasp momentarily, but Will had nowhere else to go, and the man quickly retrieved Will's arm. He pressed the blade into his skin.

Will moaned again. It was just as painful as the first cut, but Will was quickly losing energy. The man stopped cutting and let go of Will's arm, which fell limply at his side. Two pools of blood quickly surrounded him. He had to stop the bleeding. But he couldn't. Will grew dizzy and nauseated. He leaned his head back against the support beam.

The man moved in front of Will again. "About to pass out yet?"

Will looked up at him. He wanted to attempt to kick him again, but he couldn't find the energy to move his legs. Or his arms. Or any part of his body. He felt the blood drain from his face, and his eyes drooped closed.

Will slumped to one side, feeling the strain of the ropes that held him in place. The chill that had been in the air moments earlier disappeared. His body felt heavy and exhausted, and the only other sensation he felt was the burning in his wrists.

"That seems like a good stopping point," the man said.

Will wanted to ask what he meant, but he couldn't speak. He heard rustling and then the ropes around his body loosened. He collapsed to the dirt floor, unable to find the energy to brace himself as he met the ground.

Will's cheek was against the floor. He forced his eyes open. He could see the wooden slats of the shed wall. The evening light outside had faded to night. The only light was the dim glow from the lantern atop the table in the shed.

But the man had cut him free. He had to move. He had to keep fighting. He pulled his arms forward. His movements felt slow and labored, but he didn't stop. He pulled himself towards the front door of the shed, groaning with the motion. Blood continued to seep from the wounds on his wrists, creating a red trail that he slowly pulled his body through.

He heard footsteps beside him. He knew the man was still in the shed. He turned his head enough to see the man's boots beside his face. The man crouched down. He held the knife in one hand, but he had pulled his sleeve down so that his hand was not touching the knife itself. He lifted Will's hand and forced his fingers around the handle of the knife. Then the man let go of the blade.

When he released Will, his hand fell to the floor. He lost his grip on the knife. He tried to pick it up again. His grip was weak and he could barely hold the knife. His wrist ached, but he wrapped his fingers around it. He tried to lift it, wanting to wield it at the man who remained crouched beside him. But he couldn't. He had no energy. His hand fell to the floor again and he let go of the knife.

Will looked towards the front of the shed. He was still several feet away from the door, and he was certain he didn't have the energy to make it the rest of the way. Even if he had been able to crawl to the door, he wasn't sure what he would do after that. Will had left his phone in the house, and he didn't think he could make it across the yard, onto the porch, and into the house to retrieve it.

Light shone through the cracks in the wooden walls of the shed. Will wasn't sure what it was from, and he wasn't sure he'd ever find out.

The man beside him stood up again. Then, his boots disappeared from sight. He heard footsteps retreating in the other direction and then the sound of the back door to the shed opening and closing with a soft clatter.

What seemed like several minutes later, Will heard more footsteps, but they were coming from the opposite direction. They were coming from the front of the shed. He looked in that direction but saw nothing. Whoever it was must have been outside. He felt the blade of the knife beneath his hand, and his eyes fell closed.

Chapter 14

Hannibal closed the door to the private patient exit. He returned to the heavy, polished desk and sat down behind it.

He slid his appointment book in front of him and opened it to the correct date. He glanced at the last name on the page and smiled. He pulled his jacket sleeve up enough to check the time on his watch: 5:02.

Will was his next appointment, but he wasn't due to arrive for more than two hours. Hannibal closed the book and slid it to the edge of his desk. He thought about going home to fix dinner. He retrieved his phone from his desk drawer and saw that he had two missed calls and voicemails – one set from Jack and one from Will. He tapped at the screen until the first message began to play.

“Doctor Lecter, it's Agent Crawford. Will mentioned that he had an appointment with you this evening and I just wanted to make sure he went. After the day he had today, I believe a therapy session would be in his best interest. I would appreciate it if you could let me know he came by. Thanks, Doctor Lecter.”

At the end of the message, he tapped the screen and waited for the second.

“Hey, it's Will,” he began softly. “I apologize for the lateness of this message, but I need to cancel my appointment for this evening.” Pause. “Thanks.” Another pause. “Bye.”

When Hannibal reached the end of the message, he pulled his phone away from his ear. He dialed Will's number and listened to it ring seven times before the voicemail engaged.

“This is Will. Leave a message.”

Hannibal ended the call without leaving one.

Hannibal got to his feet and went to the closet to retrieve his jacket and scarf. He pulled both on and tucked his phone in the pocket of his coat. He closed the door and left the office, killing the lights as he went.

He walked across the parking lot to his Bentley. When he was inside and behind the wheel, he retrieved his phone and tried Will's number again. It rang without answer. When Hannibal heard Will's voicemail message begin, he ended the call. Once he had tucked the phone away, he started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot.

He drove towards Wolf Trap. The trip generally took him just under an hour, but traffic on the streets was sparse, and Hannibal found himself cruising over the speed limit on several occasions.

It was dark when Hannibal arrived at Will's house forty-five minutes after leaving his office. As he pulled into the driveway, he could see Will's rental car. He pulled up behind it and

killed the engine. As he stepped out of the car, he noticed that the house was mostly dark. A dim light shone through one of the front windows. Hannibal walked up the drive. He stepped onto the porch and walked to the screen door. He pulled it open and knocked on the interior door. He waited more than a minute, but heard nothing from the other side. Nothing but the sound of barking dogs. He tried the door knob, but it was locked.

Hannibal eased the screen door closed and walked to the window where the dim light shone through. He peered through the glass. Winston and some of the other dogs were in the front room, but there was no sign of Will.

Hannibal pulled his phone from his pocket and tried Will's number again. A few moments later, he heard a distinct ringing sound come from inside the house. He peered through the window again and saw a white, rectangular light illuminate on the table beside one of the chairs. Winston barked again but there was still no sign of Will.

Hannibal ended the call and tucked his phone away. He walked across the porch and down the steps. He made his way along the side of the house to the back. He went to the back door and knocked, but there was no answer once again. He tried the door knob and found that the door was unlocked. He pushed it inward and stepped inside, easing it closed behind him.

One of Will's smaller dogs trotted to him, tail wagging. Hannibal walked through the kitchen. Most of the house was dark, but Hannibal could see well enough to tell that there was no sign of the empath.

"Will?" he called, wondering if there was some kind of secret hiding spot he had no knowledge of.

But he wasn't surprised when Will didn't answer him. He wondered if Will had gone for a walk. He thought it strange that the younger man hadn't taken his phone – or his dogs – but it wasn't out of the realm of possibilities.

Hannibal walked back through the house and out the back door. As he walked down the steps, he looked towards the shed. Perhaps Will had taken to working on boat motors or fishing lures out there.

Hannibal crossed the yard and when he reached the front of the shed, he noticed that it was not latched as Will normally kept it. Hannibal grabbed the handle and pulled the door open. The inside of the shed was illuminated by a lantern on a table near the back door. But something else caught his attention.

Hannibal dropped his gaze to the dirt floor. A few feet in front of him, Will lay on his stomach, arms stretched out in front of him as though he had been crawling, pools of blood beneath his wrists.

"Will?" Hannibal said as he rushed to his side.

Will didn't respond, and Hannibal crouched down to put two fingers to the empath's neck. When he detected the distinct thump of his pulse, Hannibal let out a small sigh. He grabbed a hold of Will and gently rolled him onto his back. A cut down each of his wrists seemed to be

his only injuries. Hannibal removed his scarf and wound it tightly around Will's left wrist – the one that seemed to be losing blood more quickly. When the scarf was secured, Hannibal loosened the knot of his tie. He pulled it free and tied it tightly around Will's right wrist.

Will remained unconscious as Hannibal slipped his arms beneath Will's body – one around his back and the other under the backs of his knees. When Hannibal had a solid grip, he stood up, letting out a heavy exhale as his muscles adjusted to the weight. He left the shed with Will in his arms. He walked as quickly as he could to his car. When he reached it, he opened the back door and eased Will onto the back seat. He closed the door and got behind the wheel, breaking countless traffic laws as he sped towards the nearest hospital.

Chapter 15

The first thing Will saw when he opened his eyes was a bright light. He wondered if he was dead. But then he felt the pain in his wrists and assumed that whatever was waiting for him on the other side wouldn't include the exact same pain he had left the world with.

His limbs felt heavy and weak as he shifted. The surface he was on was soft and the air smelled of sterilization. He blinked several times until his vision cleared. He made out the light above him and the stark white ceiling and windowless walls. He turned his head and saw the machines and IV standing nearby. He dropped his gaze and realized that he was lying in a hospital bed.

There was a white blanket on him, pulled up to his chest. He pulled his heavy arms from beneath the blanket and saw that both of his wrists were wrapped in white bandages. The memories came flooding back.

"How are you feeling?"

Will turned his head towards the sound of the gentle voice. Alana came into view, stopping at the edge of the bed with her hands resting on the metal railing.

"Groggy," Will answered. It came out much more quiet and hoarse than he had intended.

Alana turned towards the table beside his bed. Will watched as she lifted a brown pitcher and poured water into a paper cup. She set the pitcher down and held the cup out to him.

Will lifted one hand, groaning at the pain in his wrist. He found the bed remote and pushed a button until he was halfway sitting up. Then, he took the cup from Alana, but he was weak and exhausted, and his hand shook. Alana removed the cup from his hand, and he let his hand fall to his side. She held the cup to his mouth. He took a sip and then rested his head back against the pillow again.

"Thanks," he said.

Alana set the cup on the side table. When she returned her attention to Will, she said, "The doctor says you're going to be all right. He expects you to make a full recovery."

"That's good."

She stared down at him, a frown on her face. "That's very good, Will."

"That's what I said."

"Do you remember what happened?"

Scenes from the shed flashed before his eyes. The shadowy figure in the corner, his own reflection in the knife, the searing pain as the man cut into his wrists, the lantern illuminating

his blood on the shed floor. Will closed his eyes. “Unfortunately.”

“Do you remember Hannibal finding you?”

Will reopened his eyes and looked up at her. He shook his head.

“He said he went looking for you after you canceled your appointment with him.”

“That’s good he did.”

“When he found you, you were unconscious. He drove you here. Stayed with you all night.”

Will lifted his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yes. In fact, he just left about a half hour ago. He had an appointment. You don’t remember him being here?”

“No.”

“He said you woke up once but were really out of it. I suppose it’s no surprise that you wouldn’t remember.”

Will nodded. He wasn’t sure why Alana was giving him the play-by-play, but for some reason, it made him feel better.

Alana let out a soft sigh. Her expression was sad as she stepped closer. She reached out and brushed Will’s hair away from his forehead.

Will let his eyes drift closed for a few moments. When he opened them, Alana stopped messing with his hair. She reached down and took a hold of his hand, squeezing gently.

“We will get you the help you need, Will.”

Will furrowed his brow. He lifted his free arm and glanced at the bandage around his wrist. “I think Hannibal already did that.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Alana said.

Will was about to ask what she meant when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked towards the door to see Jack walk in. The agent sidled up to the side of the bed opposite Alana.

“How are you feeling, Will?” he asked. His voice wasn’t nearly as gentle as Alana’s, but it didn’t have the same gruff indifference he often used with Will – or with anyone, really.

“Tired.”

“You lost a lot of blood,” Jack said by way of an explanation.

Will nodded, trying to forget the pools of his own blood.

“I had hoped that you would go to therapy yesterday.”

“Yesterday,” Will repeated.

“It’s morning,” Alana answered.

“Oh,” Will uttered, remembering what she had said about Hannibal staying with him all night. “Right.”

“When Hannibal called me last night,” Jack began. He dropped his gaze and shook his head. A few moments later, he looked at Will again. “After the shooting, I should have insisted.”

“I wasn’t exactly up for talking.”

“No,” Jack said quietly. “I suppose you weren’t.”

“I just wanted to go home and process.”

“Process,” Jack repeated.

Will nodded.

Jack stared at him.

Will dropped his gaze to the blanket draped over him.

“Alana was right,” Jack said. “I put you back out there too soon.”

Will furrowed his brow. “What?”

“I should have allowed you more time to recover from your illness. Or...” He paused.

“Or what?” Will asked, confused.

“Maybe I should not have put you back out in the field at all.”

Will shook his head. He didn’t understand.

“Like I said,” Alana began. “We will get you the help you need.”

“And like I said,” Will stated. “Hannibal already did that.”

“We don’t mean physical help,” Jack chimed in.

“What?” Will asked

“Maybe it would help to have more intensive sessions with Doctor Lecter,” Jack said. “Or maybe he knows of a facility you can stay at.”

Will’s head spun as he tried to work out what they meant. He looked down at one of his bandaged wrists and that’s when his stomach tightened. He shook his head.

“I take it no one caught the guy.”

“What?” Jack said.

“What guy, Will?” Alana asked. She reached out and brushed his hair back again.

Will lifted an arm despite the discomfort he felt. He nodded at his bandaged wrist and said, “The guy who did this.”

Alana’s brow furrowed. Softly, she asked, “What are you talking about?”

Will lay his head back against the pillow and let out a sigh. “I’ll take that as a no.”

Chapter 16

Will had just awoken from a nap. He didn't have his phone with him, but the clock on the wall said that it was nearly seven-thirty in the evening. His doctor had wavered on allowing Will to go home but had ultimately decided to keep him a second night. Will had lost a lot of blood, and the doctor thought it wise to have him stay another night. Will had considered fighting him on it, but the thought of going home hadn't been all that appealing to him, so he had agreed to stay.

Will had only been awake a few minutes when Hannibal appeared through the doorway. He was dressed to the nines as usual, with his coat draped over his arm. The doctor smiled and looked Will over.

"You look better than when I left this morning."

"Yeah? I feel like shit."

"Yes. Blood loss is a serious thing."

Will smirked. The obviousness of the statement had an amusing ring to it. Will changed the subject. "Has anyone checked on my dogs?"

Hannibal nodded. "Yes. Alana has taken it upon herself to look after them until you return home."

"Good," Will said, resting his head back against the pillow. "Maybe that's one thing I can stop worrying about."

"What else are you worried about, Will?"

Will snorted. "Let's see. For starters, the fact that Jack and Alana think I tried to kill myself."

"Did you?" Hannibal asked.

Will looked at him. "Are you kidding me?" he asked, feeling incredulous.

Hannibal didn't react. He continued to stare down at Will, waiting for an answer.

"No, Doctor Lecter. I didn't fucking try to kill myself."

"Tell me what happened, Will," Hannibal said, his voice remaining even and calm.

Will took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He told Hannibal everything – from hearing the noise in the kitchen and getting attacked, to being tied to the support beam in the shed, to the man who slit his wrists and then removed his restraints, to trying to crawl to freedom, and finally to the man putting Will's fingerprints on the knife before Will lost consciousness.

“The next thing I remember is waking up here this morning,” Will said. “Alana was already here. And then Jack came in. They were convinced that I had done this to myself. I explained all of this to them. Jack said he’d send a forensics team to my house, but I could see it in his eyes. Alana’s too.”

“What could you see?”

Will looked up at Hannibal, and his stomach tightened at the sight of the doctor’s stoic expression. “They didn’t believe a word of it.”

“Jack called me yesterday afternoon,” Hannibal said.

Will furrowed his brow, confused by the change in subject. “Okay.”

“He informed me that you had had a difficult day and that he wanted to be sure you went to your therapy session. But then I received your message that you weren’t going to make it.”

“Yeah,” Will said gently. “I wasn’t up for it.”

“I am sure you can appreciate how this appears.”

Will smirked. “It appears as though I got overwhelmed from having to shoot a woman and ended up cutting my own wrists.”

“Will, you have not been consistent with your medication.”

Will looked up at him again, furrowing his brow in question.

“I am sensitive to the signs,” Hannibal said by way of an explanation.

“What are you saying? That because I haven’t been taking my medication as regularly as I should, that I’m still hallucinating? You think I hallucinated all of this?”

“Will, I am simply trying to say that I am concerned about you.”

“I didn’t do this, Hannibal.”

“Was it the same man who has been following you?”

“I—” Will stopped and shook his head. “I never saw his face before, but he said he had been following me for weeks. He even...” Will trailed off, letting out a sigh.

“He even what, Will?”

“He said that he wanted to make it look as though I had tried to kill myself. He wanted to take away the thing he thought I loved most.” Will looked up at Hannibal, but the doctor said nothing. “My job,” Will finished. “That’s what he thought, anyway.”

“And he planned to take your job away from you by making it look as though you tried to kill yourself.”

Will nodded. “He said that the FBI wouldn’t want to employ someone who was so unstable as to try something like that.”

“Why would he want to take your job away from you?”

“He didn’t say it outright, but I got the impression that I had taken away something – or someone – he loved.”

“Did you recognize him?”

“Not exactly,” Will said. When Hannibal tilted his head, Will explained. “I don’t know him, but he looked somewhat familiar.”

“I see.”

Will looked up at him. He wasn’t sure Hannibal believed anything he was saying and he felt his stomach tighten. The fact that Alana and Jack hadn’t believed him had been frustrating, but something about the possibility that Hannibal didn’t believe him felt much worse.

Will took in a deep breath. “I need you to believe me,” Will whispered.

“I believe that you are not lying.”

“But you don’t believe it really happened.”

“I am reserving judgment about that.”

Will sighed. He supposed that would have to do for the time being.

Chapter 17

“The team found nothing.”

Will looked up at Jack who stood at the side of his hospital bed. Jack had sent a team to Will’s house to gather forensic evidence. “Nothing?”

“Well, not nothing. They found a lot of your blood in the shed.”

“What about the rope?”

“There was no rope, Will.”

“Nothing in the house?”

Jack exhaled a sigh. “No.”

“How is that possible?”

Jack stared down at him.

Will looked away. He knew what the agent was thinking. Jack undoubtedly thought that it was possible because Will had hallucinated the entire incident. Will looked down at his hands resting in his lap. At the bandages covering his wrists.

“I didn’t hallucinate this,” Will whispered.

“Doctor Lecter told me that this was not the first incident you had had.”

Will smirked. “Of course he did.”

“He is not your official therapist, Will. He has broken no rules by talking to me about you.”

“Right,” Will muttered, thinking less about ethics and more like he had been betrayed by a friend.

“Tell me about the other incidents.”

Will shook his head, wondering what good it would do.

“Will.”

He sighed and rested his head back. “I was followed by a car a couple different times. One of the nights, it ran me off the road.”

Jack lifted his eyebrows. “And you didn’t think to tell anyone about that?”

“I did tell someone about that.”

Jack nodded. "Hannibal."

"Yes."

"Hence the rental car you've been driving." Jack paused. "Is that where you got the cuts on your face?"

Will looked up at him and nodded. "There was another night when I woke up and heard someone outside my house. I went out to look, but he had vanished. He left a boot print in the snow beneath my window, though."

"What did Doctor Lecter say about all of this?"

Will snorted a wry laugh. "He said he is reserving judgment about all of it."

Jack chuckled. "That sounds like him."

"It's a better reply than what I got from you or Alana."

"I'm an agent with the FBI, Will."

"How could I forget?"

Jack gave him an incredulous look. "Most of my life revolves around evidence." He waved his hands and added, "And there's just no evidence here. None that would lead to the story you told."

"It's not a story, Jack." Will lifted his arms and looked at his bandaged wrists. "What about this?"

"There's no evidence that someone else did that to you."

Will let his arms fall to his lap again. He felt his voice raising as he asked, "You honestly believe that I tried to kill myself?"

"Doctor Lecter informed me that you went off your meds."

"What didn't Doctor Lecter tell you about me?" Will scoffed. "And I didn't go off my meds."

"No, that's right. He said that you weren't taking them like you should have been."

"I've been taking them enough to get rid of the hallucinations."

Jack stared at Will for several moments. Then, he lifted his eyebrows and asked, "Are you sure about that?"

Will didn't have the chance to answer before another figure appeared in the room. Will turned his head to see Alana walking towards his bed. She looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Am I interrupting?"

“Not at all,” Jack said, his voice softening. “I should be going anyway.”

“Don’t leave on my account,” Alana said.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Jack smiled. “But I really should go.” He looked at Will and said, “Feel better, Will.”

Will nodded.

Jack said goodbye to both of them and then left the room.

“Should I even ask what was going on there?”

Will shook his head. He took a deep breath and then looked up at Alana. He offered a smile and she returned the gesture.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better than yesterday. The doc said I could leave today.”

“That’s great,” Alana said. “I’d be happy to take you home when you’re released.”

“Thanks. How are my dogs doing?”

“They’re good. I think they miss you though.”

Will rested his head back against the pillow again. “They’re in good hands with you.”

She smiled. Then, her expression fell and she let out a soft sigh.

“What?” Will asked gently.

“Has anyone suggested having more tests done?”

“Tests for what?”

“I am concerned that you have not completely gotten rid of your encephalitis.”

Will let out a hefty sigh. “I didn’t realize Doctor Lecter was such a gossip.”

“He’s not a gossip,” Alana said gently. “I pieced it together and asked him if you had been responding well to your medication. He told me you had not taken it as frequently as you should have.”

“Right.”

“I am just concerned that it is not gone yet.”

“It might not be,” Will admitted. “But encephalitis or not, I didn’t slice my own wrists.”

“Will, your perception of reality was skewed before. You had many hallucinations and lost a lot of time wherein you had no idea what you had done. What makes you so certain that that is not what is happening now?”

“I never hurt myself before.”

“Self-harm, whether intentional or not, is a common side effect of hallucinations.”

“What makes you so certain that I did this to myself?”

“I’m not certain of that, Will. I would just like for you to take care of the illness you already know you have.”

“And I will do that. But in the meantime, Jack should be looking for the person who actually did this to me.”

Alana nodded, but Will could see that it wasn’t in acknowledgement. It was an absent gesture meant to pacify Will.

“Besides, if I were going to kill myself, I would sure as hell do it in a much quicker way than slicing my wrists and waiting to bleed out.”

Alana’s features contorted. “Will.”

Will smirked. “But the main thing is that I wouldn’t do it at all.”

“Right,” Alana mumbled. But her frown told Will that she didn’t believe him at all.

Chapter 18

Alana shut off the engine and then turned in her seat to look at Will. He sat still in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead. She followed his gaze to the shed beyond the house. She knew Will was desperate for her – or anyone – to believe that what he had experienced really happened. But Jack's team of top forensics analysts had gone over the shed and the house and found nothing of consequence. That hadn't helped his case. And then finding out that Will hadn't been consistent with his medication had nearly removed all doubt for Alana. She had never thought of Will as a potential suicide risk, so she chose to believe that, if he had done this to himself, it had been during a hallucination in which he had no idea what he was doing.

Will unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door. Alana followed suit, getting out of the car and walking around the front to stand next to Will. He glanced down at her and then returned his attention to the shed. When he began to walk towards it, she walked alongside him.

When they reached the shed, the door was closed but unlatched. Will pulled it open but didn't step inside.

"I can't believe that they found nothing."

Alana glanced around the shed, her focus resting on a dark, dried pool of red just a few feet in front of them. There was a thin trail of the same color that led to the back of the shed. She found herself following it until it ended at a support beam near the back.

"That's where I was tied up," Will said. He appeared at her side a moment later. "He tied me to the beam and then cut my wrists."

Alana swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. The idea that Will had nearly died in the very spot she was standing – whether self-inflicted or not – made her stomach churn.

"He even positioned himself behind me so that the cuts would appear as though I had done them myself."

"The doctor said that the wounds appeared self-inflicted."

"He wanted it that way."

Alana looked away from Will's dried blood on the shed floor. She reached out and took his hand and he turned towards her.

"Will, I want you to tell me that you didn't do this to yourself."

"I have already told you that," Will said. There was a hint of incredulity to it, but his voice remained gentle.

Alana stared up at him.

“I didn’t do this to myself,” he whispered.

She wasn’t convinced that that was the truth, but what she was convinced of was that, if he had done it to himself, he hadn’t done it knowingly. “I want for you to start taking your medication consistently.”

Will nodded. “That might help with the nightmares, if nothing else.”

And the hallucinations, Alana wanted to say. “And I would prefer it if you would have some more tests done.”

Will sighed. He lowered his gaze and Alana could see him refocus on the dried pool of blood next to the support beam.

“How could the team not have found anything useful at all?”

Alana said nothing.

“Pretend, for a moment, that you believe me,” he began. He let go of her hand and paced the floor. “How could there be nothing?”

Alana hesitated. She wasn’t sure going along with his delusion was the best option, but he had asked her to pretend. She decided to humor him. “He was careful,” she said. “You said that he attacked you inside the house. Did you leave the door unlocked?”

Will nodded. “The back door was unlocked.”

“He didn’t leave any fingerprints. Did he wear gloves?”

Will’s features contorted and then he shook his head. “But I think he wiped the knife off. When he put my fingerprints on it, he was holding it with the sleeve of his jacket.”

“So he was very careful,” Alana said. “You mentioned that he said he had been following you for weeks, right?”

Will nodded.

“That would have given him plenty of time to plan. Plenty of time to figure out how to get rid of evidence.”

Will slowly walked around the support beam, staring down at the pools of dried blood. “So, it’s possible.”

Alana furrowed her brow. “What is?”

Will stopped walking and looked up at her. “It’s possible that everything I’ve told you is the truth.”

Alana stared at Will. His eyes were wider than normal and full of hope. Alana refrained from sighing.

Chapter 19

Hannibal sat with his legs crossed and hands folded in his lap. Across from him, Will paced behind the empty chair, fidgeting and gesturing as he spoke.

“Everyone thinks I’m making this up. Just because I haven’t been consistent with my medication.” Will paused and turned to stare, unblinking, at Hannibal. “Thank you for that, by the way.”

Hannibal said nothing on the matter and Will resumed his animated pacing.

“I was so certain,” Will said.

When he didn’t continue, Hannibal asked, “Certain of what, Will?”

Will let out a heavy sigh. “Certain that it was real.”

“And now?” Hannibal asked.

“Now,” Will began. He shook his head stopped and behind the chair. He put his hands on the back of it and leaned into it. “Now, I don’t want to believe that it wasn’t real.”

“Are you so certain it wasn’t?”

Will looked up at him, his brow furrowed. “No.” He pushed off the back of the chair and walked towards the windows to Hannibal’s right. “But the team didn’t find anything.”

Will sighed and stared out through the window. “Maybe everyone’s right,” he said, his voice quiet and meek. “Maybe it’s the encephalitis.” He turned enough to look at Hannibal. “But it was all so clear.”

“What was clear?”

“Everything. The attack. The car following me. All of it. It wasn’t like that before.”

“How so?”

“When I was having hallucinations and lost time, it all seemed real, but it wasn’t so distinct. It had a certain haze to it. Like my eyes were clear, but my mind was foggy.”

“Now, you’ve been able to think clearly.”

“Yes,” Will breathed. “Each one of these incidents has been exceptionally clear.”

“Have you resumed taking your medication?”

Will nodded.

“Perhaps it is not encephalitis, after all,” Hannibal said.

Will let out an audible sigh. His shoulders relaxed, and Hannibal refrained from sighing himself as he delivered his next statement.

“It could be the product of mental illness.”

Will stared at him, his body becoming visibly tense once again.

“Hallucinations can be the mind’s way of detaching from reality in order to protect oneself from things that have become too overwhelming to handle. Tell me, Will, what has overwhelmed you lately?”

Will’s features contorted. Quietly, he said, “You know the answer to that.”

“You have only just continued your work for Jack out in the field. Mere hours before this most recent incident, you were forced to shoot a woman, nearly ending her life.”

Will nodded slowly. “Alana wants me to have more tests done. Not just for encephalitis but for mental illness.”

“Perhaps such tests would be beneficial.”

Will’s eyes darted around the room, unfocused and distant, as though he were trying to find a more comfortable answer to his problem.

Hannibal uncrossed his legs. “Or,” he began, getting to his feet. He wound around the backless couch towards the window where Will stood. “Perhaps you were right all along.”

Will furrowed his brow. When Hannibal joined him, Will looked up at him, his eyes darting again, searching Hannibal’s face.

“You believe it has all been real?”

“I believe that what you experienced could very well be real,” Hannibal said, tucking his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “There is also the possibility that, if this man exists, he is not finished with you.”

Will’s lips parted.

Hannibal reached out and put a gentle hand on Will’s shoulder. “I believe it is time that we find out the truth.”

Will took in a deep breath, exhaling a heavy sigh. “How do we do that?”

Chapter 20

Will was on the road to Hannibal's for dinner. The FBI had solved the previous case and Jack hadn't yet called Will in on another, for which the latter was relieved, so he had spent the majority of his free time at home, with his dogs.

It had been more than a week since the attack, and there had been no other incidents. The man who had cut Will's wrists must have known that he would have reported it to the police, and Will assumed he was simply lying low after the incident. Hannibal had expressed some doubt about the reality of the incident, but he had also suggested that it may very well have happened. Will hoped that he wasn't going crazy. As terrifying as it was to think that there was a man roaming free who wanted nothing more than to end Will's life, it put Will at greater unease to believe that there was no such man out there at all. That he had hallucinated the bulk of it and had ultimately inflicted the wounds upon himself.

Will shook the thought from his mind. He was getting ahead of himself. Hannibal had suggested that if the man were real, and what he had said about wanting Will to suffer were accurate, then it was safe to assume that he was not finished with Will. Simply cutting his wrists and planting a seed of doubt in the FBI's minds as to his mental stability would not be enough for him in the long run.

Hannibal had concocted a simple plan in order to divine the truth. Will hoped it would work. The doctor had shown up several days earlier with a set of motion-activated surveillance cameras. He had helped Will install them around the outside of his house. Then, they had connected the feed to Will's phone and Hannibal's tablet, so that they could both monitor activity around Will's house.

Will felt more comfortable at home, but when he was out, he constantly felt as though he were being watched or followed. He hadn't caught sight of the same blue car from before, but that didn't mean anything. The man easily could have switched vehicles. And every car that was behind Will for more than a couple of blocks made him uneasy.

And that night was no different. As he drove to Hannibal's, he had caught sight of one particular vehicle that seemed to trail behind him longer than he deemed appropriate. The car was not the same make, model, or even color as the one that had followed him and run him off the road before, but that didn't set his stomach at ease.

When Will veered off the highway, the car behind him took the same exit. When Will turned onto his usual route to Hannibal's the car remained behind him. But where the car from before had seemed to remain several car lengths back, the current one followed much more closely.

Was the guy trying to send a message?

Will wasn't sure what that message could be. I'm watching you, perhaps. But Will had already assumed as much. The farther Will drove, the bigger and more uncomfortable the knot in his stomach became, until his entire abdomen was tense and in pain.

When he made another turn, he glanced in the rearview mirror. The car made the same turn. And that's when Will felt his heart rate increase. He pressed more firmly on the gas and noticed the car shrink in his mirror. He watched for traffic and then swung out into the oncoming lane and whipped the car around so that it was sideways across the street. He slammed on the brakes and threw the car into park.

The car that had been following him skidded to a halt. Will jumped out of his vehicle and yanked his gun from its holster. He held it with both hands, pointed at the ground, as he moved around the back of his car. He hurried down the street, towards the car. As he approached, he raised the gun. The windows were tinted and Will couldn't see the driver.

"Roll the window down!" Will yelled.

There was a moment where nothing happened. Will thought about charging the car, yanking the door open, and pulling the driver out. But then the window began to lower.

When it was halfway down, Will's breath caught in his throat and he quickly lowered his weapon. The driver was not the man who had hurt him. He was not a man at all.

"Please, don't hurt me," the teenage boy said. His eyes were wide and feral, and his voice trembled.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Will reassured him. He tucked his gun back into the holster. "Why are you following me?"

"I-I'm not. I'm not following you, I swear. I live up the street. Please, please don't hurt me."

"Shit," Will muttered. He looked beyond the young man's car. Another car turned onto the road a few blocks away. "Are you still okay to drive?" Will asked.

The kid nodded. Will could hear his shaky breaths.

"I'm sorry," Will sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I thought you were following me," he said gently, as though that would diminish the kid's terror. "Call someone to come get you." Will backed away. Then he turned and hurried to his car and slid inside. He put it in gear, whipped the wheel around until the car was pointed in the correct direction, and he took off.

He glanced in his rearview mirror several times. The young kid hadn't moved his vehicle. The other car that had turned onto the street stopped alongside him.

"Shit," Will uttered again.

By the time Hannibal's house came into view, Will felt as though his nerves were electrified. His head spun and his hands shook. He parked outside the doctor's house and killed the engine. He spent a couple of minutes in the privacy of his car, trying to regain control of his breathing. When he finally emerged from the vehicle and approached the house, his breathing was mostly under control, but he didn't feel like any less of a wreck than he had since pointing his gun at a child just minutes earlier.

Chapter 21

“A child, Hannibal. A child.” Will paced Hannibal’s kitchen as the doctor prepared dinner. “I could have killed him.”

“But you didn’t,” Hannibal said.

“I know. But I could have.”

“Will, perhaps it is not in your best interest to carry a weapon right now.”

“But what if it had been the same guy?”

“You would have shot him in the middle of the street.”

“Yes.”

“Instead,” Hannibal said dully, “you nearly shot a child.”

Will stopped pacing. He looked at Hannibal, brow furrowed. “Which side are you on?”

“I am on your side, Will. I want what is best for you.”

“And what is that? You seemed to think it was fine because I didn’t use the gun. But now...”

“I never said that it was fine. I am simply relieved that you did not hurt an innocent child.”

Will sighed heavily. He scrubbed his hands over his face, not feeling any less worked up than when Hannibal had opened the front door and invited him inside.

“Will, we have not yet determined if these incidents are real or not. I want to be sure that you are not going to hurt anyone, including yourself.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“You are acting rashly, Will. Rash decisions and firearms do not mix well.”

“You think I should stop carrying.”

“I think you should think about your actions before you carry them out.”

“But if I’m just crazy like everyone thinks I am, maybe I can’t do that.”

“Maybe not.”

“Then what? I leave the gun at home? What if I’m not crazy?”

“I do not believe you are crazy, Will.”

“Just suffering from harm-inducing hallucinations.”

Hannibal looked up from the herb-covered meat on the counter. He stared at Will through his eyelashes.

Will sighed. He walked to the chair in the corner of the kitchen and took a seat. “I feel like I’m going mad.”

“You are scared.”

Will looked up at him.

“Animals who are scared tend to become more aggressive.”

“My aggression may not be good for other people.”

“Nor yourself,” Hannibal said. “Your fear is causing paranoia and is thus allowing your mind to believe that there are dangers where there are none.”

“What am I supposed to do about that?”

“You are supposed to do what is best for yourself and others.”

Will studied Hannibal’s face from across the room. The doctor said nothing more, and Will whispered, “I don’t know what that is.”

“I want you to be safe, Will.”

“My safety may be putting others in danger, though.”

“Perhaps it is time to have those tests done.”

Will sighed. He wanted to argue. He wanted to insist that he was fine and stable and that he could discern reality from hallucination. He wanted to insist that he wasn’t even having hallucinations. But he couldn’t. He didn’t know what the truth was. The only truth he was sure of was that he had nearly killed an innocent child earlier that evening. He was bound and determined not to let that happen again.

“Maybe you’re right,” Will uttered.

Hannibal looked up at him and nodded.

“And maybe I should give up the gun until I know more.”

“I would hate to think that you are armed and having hallucinations, Will.”

Will dropped his gaze, staring at his fidgeting hands. “So would I.”

“Tomorrow,” Hannibal said.

Will looked up, brow furrowed.

“I believe that you should have the tests done as soon as possible.”

“That’s probably best,” Will said.

“If you would like, I can accompany you.”

Will hesitated. The idea of having Hannibal visit the doctor with him made him feel like an inept child. But as he thought about it more – about having Hannibal there to do some of the talking, to translate the medical mumbo-jumbo, and to comfort him if need be – it put his nerves at ease. He realized that Hannibal was staring at him. Will took in a deep breath and nodded.

“Very well,” Hannibal said, a small smile playing on his lips. “In the meantime, we will have dinner and dessert, and you are more than welcome to spend the night again.”

Will’s stomach fluttered at the invitation. He felt himself smiling but wasn’t sure why. “I’m not sure that is necessary.”

“Perhaps not necessary but more convenient.”

Will lifted his eyebrows in question.

“The specialist I will take you to is in Baltimore. It does not make sense for you to drive home tonight and back to the city tomorrow.”

Will thought about his dogs. He had fed them a healthy portion of food before leaving the house earlier in the evening. He knew they would be set for the night. But if he didn’t return home, they would be hungry in the morning.

“Perhaps we can call Alana,” Hannibal suggested.

“For what?”

The doctor smiled. “I can see you thinking about them.”

“Who?” Will asked but smirked despite himself.

“Your furry companions. Perhaps she would feed them in the morning.”

Of course Hannibal was reading his mind. Will shook his head but smiled gently. “I suppose that would be all right.”

Chapter 22

Hannibal retired to his home office after dinner. He retrieved his phone and tapped until Will's name appeared on the screen. But he didn't press Send. He hadn't seen Will for a few days – since the empath had spent the night for the second time. He felt a gentle pang at the thought of him, a feeling he could only describe as longing.

He wasn't sure Will would appreciate Hannibal checking up on him – and he knew that's how the younger man would perceive it. He set his phone on the desk without calling. Instead, he opened a drawer and came out with his tablet. He turned it on and went straight to the surveillance feed monitoring Will's property.

He manipulated the program until he could see live shots from each of the cameras he and Will had mounted around the latter's house. Everything appeared calm. It was nearly sunset, and the black-and-white frames of Will's yard were well-illuminated. Hannibal could see that the younger man's rental car was not in the driveway. He wondered where Will was.

Hannibal knew that Jack had not brought Will in on any more cases yet. Hannibal wasn't sure Jack had spoken with Will about it, but the agent had voiced his concerns to Hannibal. Taking it upon himself, Hannibal had insisted that Will remain out of the field for the time being. Jack hadn't taken much – or any – convincing, and Hannibal assumed he had already made up his mind and was simply looking for validation as to whether or not he had done the right thing.

Hannibal had decided to keep that particular meeting to himself. He wasn't sure why. He had never had an issue with telling Will the truth before. But he knew that that specific piece of information would anger Will. For some reason, that notion bothered Hannibal, so he had refrained. Hannibal wasn't worried about what Will would do. He wasn't worried that the empath would become overwhelmed and break from reality again. His reasons for neglecting to enlighten Will were entirely selfish. He wanted Will to be pleased with him.

As Hannibal stared at the grid of surveillance feed on his tablet, he thought about the reason for the cameras. When he had found Will in the shed that evening, unconscious and bleeding from both wrists, Hannibal didn't know what to think. He hadn't allowed himself the time to analyze the situation any further than assessing Will's injuries and providing as much medical attention as he could. Later, as he had reflected on the events, he was certain – no matter what Jack or Alana assumed – that Will had not knowingly harmed himself. The thought of Will doing such a thing was preposterous. Will was unique and troubled, but he was far from suicidal.

The most obvious alternatives, then, were that he had done it during a hallucination or that he had not done it at all. Hannibal had not gotten close enough to Will for the first few days. But the evening that Will had spent the night again – the evening that Hannibal had offered to accompany Will to his appointment with the specialist – Hannibal had inhaled Will's scent. It was not fevered as it had been before, and he had detected no hint of physical illness.

Nonetheless, the two of them had gone to Will's appointment the next morning. Hannibal had considered informing Will that there was nothing for the specialist to find, but he doubted Will would find suitable a diagnosis based solely on Hannibal's heightened sense of smell. So they had gone. And Will went through another round of testing. And when the results had come back a short time later, they were as Hannibal had suspected – Will was suffering from no physical maladies. Concluding that the only option remaining – besides the possibility that it was entirely as Will had experienced – was that he was suffering from hallucinations brought on by mental illness, the empath wanted a second opinion about the state of his mental health.

Hannibal had never believed that Will suffered from mental illness – at least not to a degree that would cause hallucinations – and he had finally decided to let Will know that he was open to believing that Will's story had been true all along. Will had gotten his second opinion from another psychiatrist – something that had set Hannibal's nerves on edge. Will had claimed that he simply wanted to be thorough, as though Hannibal was incapable of providing a thorough analysis for him. Hannibal had tried to ignore the insult, reminding himself that Will's fear and paranoia had taken a front seat to everything else, including his consideration.

Since then, the only thing left to do was wait.

Jack's forensics team had found nothing useful in Will's house, shed, or yard. Both Hannibal and Will assumed that the man was not finished with whatever game he had set in motion for Will. And it was only a matter of time before the man returned to finish what he had started.

Hannibal set his tablet aside, leaving the feed on display. He got to his feet and walked to the drafting table in the corner of the room. He removed the drawing he had begun days earlier and returned to his desk. He gathered his supplies and continued working on the piece, adding deep shadows to the crown of unruly curls. He had only just begun when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

He glanced at the tablet on the edge of his desk. There was movement in one of the frames – a dark figure approaching Will's house. For a moment, he thought it was Will arriving home, but he could see from the other frames that there was still no car in the driveway. Hannibal picked up the tablet and tapped the screen, enlarging the frame that showed the figure.

It was a man he didn't recognize. He considered the possibility that it was a visitor, there to see Will for one innocent reason or another. But even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew that wasn't the truth.

Hannibal retrieved his phone and dialed Will's number. It rang once and went directly to voice mail. While he rarely left phone messages, he thought the situation required an exception.

"Will, it's Hannibal. There is someone outside of your house. I am headed there now."

He ended the call and got to his feet, grabbing his tablet. He snatched his coat on the way out the door, pulling it on as he hurried to his car. As he slid behind the wheel and pulled away from his house, he had hope that he would arrive at Will's before the empath did.

Chapter 23

Will had gone ice fishing for the majority of the afternoon and evening. The temperatures had dropped, and Will had driven up to a lake he knew of that typically froze over in the winter. He had drilled a hole in the ice, propped himself on his fishing stool and waited in the cold until the fish began to bite.

The air was bitter, but Will found it invigorating. Unsurprisingly, he had been the only one on the lake and the solitude was calming.

By the time the sun sank behind the evergreens at the outskirts of the lake, Will had caught two fish. As the sky darkened, he gathered up his equipment, tucked his catches into a cooler, and returned to his rental car which was parked nearby.

He drove towards home as gray dusk gave way to the darkness of the late evening. Despite how many times he glanced in his mirrors checking for other vehicles, the drive was quiet and uneventful. Nearly a half hour after leaving the frozen lake, Will arrived home.

He turned off the car and got out. Then, he gathered his cooler and fishing equipment and walked up onto the porch. He set the cooler down and unlocked the door. When he went inside, the living room was dark. He flipped on a light and emptied his arms onto the floor near the door. He was about to turn around to grab the cooler from the front porch when he was struck by an odd feeling.

He looked around the room. Nothing seemed to be missing. Nothing was out of place. It was quiet.

Too quiet.

There were no dogs in the room. None of them had come to greet him. It was a first. And Will knew it wasn't by chance.

He reached for his holster but it was gone. His talk with Hannibal several days earlier – after nearly shooting the teenage boy on the street – had left him paranoid about what he might do if he hallucinated again. He had started leaving his gun at home. In the bedroom. He would have to cross the house to get to the weapon and, if his instincts were right, he doubted he would make it to the firearm before being attacked.

He looked over his shoulder. His nerves relaxed slightly at the sight of the shotgun propped against the desk by the front door. He hurried to it and picked it up, quickly checking to make sure it was loaded. Then, he started towards the back of his house.

He walked slowly, taking his time and letting his eyes adjust as he moved from room to room. It wasn't until he reached the bedroom that he saw any signs of life. Or what he hoped was life, anyway.

As he entered the bedroom, he saw his dogs lying motionless, creating small islands of lifeless fur on his bedroom floor. They were still and unmoving and didn't react as Will approached. Will's heart leapt into his throat.

He rushed to Buster, the first dog inside the door. He was on his side and Will knelt on the floor next to him. Will placed his hand against the dog's chest until he felt it expand against his hand. He quickly moved from dog to dog, doing the same. When he had determined that each and every one of his dogs was still alive and breathing, he got to his feet.

He kept the shotgun in one hand and used his free hand to pull his phone from his pocket. He had the number to the emergency animal clinic in his phone book, but when he tried to bring the phone to life, the screen remained black. He rushed to the bedside table and found his charger in a drawer. He fumbled with the cord, finally plugging the phone into the wall.

He pressed the power button and the phone began to boot up. "Come on," he muttered. As he stared down at the phone in his hand, he heard a distinct creak behind him.

He dropped the phone on the table and whipped around with the shotgun in both hands. As the figure approached, Will squeezed the trigger. But the man was on him too quickly and the muzzle of the gun was knocked to the side. The shotgun blast sprayed the wall instead.

The man was in close on Will and the latter threw an elbow, connecting with the man's face. As the man staggered backwards, Will aimed the gun again. The man darted out of the room as Will got off another shot. He was out of rounds and the box of shotgun shells was on the desk by the front door. He tossed the shotgun onto the bed and retrieved his handgun from the end table. He quickly checked the clip – full – and racked a round into the chamber. He sidled up to the bedroom doorway and whipped around into the hall. The man was nowhere to be seen.

Will skulked through the house. The man was not in the kitchen or bathroom. He walked towards the front of the house. He doubted the man had fled, and that only left one room. Will walked down the hallway. He assumed the man was waiting for him at the end, but he didn't know which side of the front room he would be on. Will held the gun in towards his body as he reached the end of the hallway.

He eased into the living room, preparing to act quickly. The room was dark and he assumed the man had shut off the light that Will had previously turned on. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and whipped to his right. He wasn't even able to squeeze the trigger before his forearm was struck with an intense pain from a solid object.

Will cried out and fought to hold onto the gun. He aimed as he backed away, but the man was on him too quickly once again. He hit Will again, in the other arm, and Will dropped the gun. He dove onto the floor to retrieve it but the man was on top of him in an instant.

Will expected to be hit over the head with whatever had struck his arms, but he wasn't. Instead, he felt the man's fist connect with the side of his face. He groaned but continued to struggle for the gun. It was out of reach. The man punched him again and Will felt a trickle of blood wind its way down from his eyebrow. Will struggled as best he could but the man he

fought with was not small. And with his position above Will, he had leverage on his side. The man hit Will in the face a couple more times as the latter did his best to fend off the blows.

After half a dozen punches, Will's face throbbed and he felt winded from the struggle. The man moved off him momentarily, and Will crawled towards the gun-shaped shadow on the floor. The man hurried ahead of him and picked up the gun.

"You're done fighting," the man said.

Even in the darkness, Will could see the man point the gun at him. Will tensed but remained where he was. The man got to his feet and walked across the room. There was a soft click and the room was illuminated once again.

Will let his eyes adjust and then he looked up into the face of the man who had slit his wrists days earlier.

"You got what you wanted," Will said. His face ached as he spoke. "Everyone thinks I'm crazy now."

The man smiled. "Sit up, Mr. Graham."

Will did as he was told. He pushed himself up into a sitting position, leaning back against the front of an arm chair. He caught sight of something long and dark on the floor a few feet in front of him. It was a fire poker. His fire poker. And it was solid iron. It was no wonder his arms throbbed the way they did. But he still wore his coat and couldn't see how much damage was done to them.

"Making everyone believe you are crazy was stage one."

"And what's stage two?"

The corners of the man's mouth were turned upward. Will looked away.

"I think you already know that," the man said.

"Killing me."

"You are smart."

"So, do it, then."

The man hummed low in his throat, shrugging a shoulder. "The gun is too quick for you." He tucked the weapon into the back of his waistband. "I think you and I are going to have a little more fun before I finish you off."

Will gently rubbed at one wrist over the sleeve of his coat. "Great," he muttered, feeling the tenderness beneath the sleeve.

Chapter 24

The next thing Will knew, the man was dragging over the chair from the desk near the door. He ordered Will to get up into the chair. Will refused until the man aimed the gun at him again.

"And remove your coat." As Will complied, the man added, "Don't worry, Mr. Graham. That is the last thing I will ask you to do. All that is required of you now is to sit still and try not to pass out from pain or blood loss."

The man kept his eye on Will as he moved around the far arm chair. He bent down and came out with a length of rope.

Will considered making a run for it. He wasn't yet tied down, and he knew it would be his last chance to escape. Feeling his blood begin to pound, he got to his feet and dashed away in one quick motion. Before he exited the room, he saw the man drop the rope and dart after him.

Will ran down the hallway towards the back of the house. As he neared the door to the kitchen, a shot rang out.

The outside of his leg burned and he lost his balance. He stumbled, catching himself on the edge of the counter. Then he felt the steaming muzzle of the gun against the back of his neck.

"Do you want me to make this quick?"

Yes, Will thought. A quick death would be much preferred over the long, bloody, and torturous one that the man seemed to have planned for him. But he couldn't bring himself to say it. He couldn't bring himself to ask the man to end his life. At least with a drawn out death, Will would possibly have another chance to escape.

"No," he finally uttered.

The gun muzzle was removed from his neck a moment later.

"Turn around."

Will did as he was told.

"Walk."

Will limped back towards the front room. When they were in the hallway, Will glanced into the bedroom where his dogs were still motionless. He stopped walking.

"What did you do to them?"

"Just gave them a little something to help with their beauty sleep. A couple of them could use it."

Will glanced over his shoulder.

The man smirked. "That little one with the underbite, especially."

Will looked at Buster who was closest to the doorway. He'd never thought of the dog as ugly.

"Don't worry," the man said. "They'll be fine. I like dogs, remember?"

"Right," Will muttered.

"Close the door. Let's go."

Will stepped forward and pulled the bedroom door closed. Then, he turned back towards the front room and continued walking.

When he reached the living room, he returned to the desk chair without being ordered. He carefully lowered himself onto the seat, grimacing from the shooting and burning pain in his leg. He looked down at it and saw that the outside of his jeans were stained red. It was a small stain though and didn't seem to be growing any larger. The bullet had only grazed him.

"Run again and I still won't make it quick. But you will have a bullet in your knee cap instead."

Will watched the man. He returned to the side of the arm chair and retrieved the length of rope he had dropped. He slowly walked back towards Will.

Will couldn't help but think about the previous encounter. The cuts to his wrists. The pools of blood. Will's breathing increased as he tried to come up with a plan of escape. His eyes darted around the room until they finally focused on one thing – the fire poker across the floor.

It was well out of reach. Will knew he couldn't dive across the room, grab the weapon, and do any real damage to the man before being shot. Especially with his leg burning the way it did. But it was his only chance.

He tensed as the man neared him. He was about to make his move when he heard a distinct ringing sound from the other side of the house. It was his phone, ringing in the bedroom.

He looked towards the hall. He wondered who could be calling him. Was it Alana wanting to see how he was doing? Was it Jack, ready to invite Will to a new crime scene? Was it Hannibal checking up on him? He returned his attention to the man in front of him. Will wasn't sure he would ever find out who it was.

The man walked around behind Will. Then, the latter felt the hard steel of the gun against the back of his head. The muzzle had cooled significantly.

"Don't even think about moving."

But that's all Will could do. Even as he remained perfectly still, all he could think about was trying to escape.

The man removed the gun from his head. Then he wrapped the rope around Will's body and arms, securing him to the chair with his palms up. By the time the man had finished, Will was certain that he couldn't have moved even if he tried. Except maybe to tip the entire chair over, with him still attached to it.

The man moved in front of Will. He tucked the gun into the back of his waistband, and then he crouched down and slipped a hand into his jacket. He came out with a knife – the same knife he had used before. Will's knife. He ran the tip of it down Will's thigh until he reached the blossom of blood on the side of his jeans. The man pointed the tip to the wound and gently pressed into it.

Will groaned, gritting his teeth. His breathing picked up, and he wanted nothing more than to break free and stab the man in the neck with that very knife.

“Have you figured out who I am yet?” the man asked. When Will didn't answer, the man put more pressure behind the knife.

Will cried out.

“Answer me and I'll stop.”

“No,” Will growled.

“No, you won't answer? Or no, you don't know who I am?”

“I don't know who you are.”

“Huh.”

Will was certain that that was not the answer the man was looking for. He expected him to bury the knife blade in Will's leg.

But he didn't. Instead, he kept his word, easing up on the pressure until the knife point was away from Will's wound. Will tried to catch his breath.

“I'll make it easy for you.” He reached out and unbuttoned one of Will's shirt sleeves. He slowly rolled it up to Will's elbow, revealing his bandaged wrist. “You sent my brother to prison.”

“Your...”

“Brother.”

Will stared at the man's face, studying the familiar features. After a few moments, he nodded. “I remember your brother.”

“I should think so.”

“He was a demented psychopath.”

The man's jaw tensed, and Will felt equal parts satisfied and terrified. The man refocused his attention to Will's wrist. He carelessly cut the bandage free. Will's wrist was purple around the line of stitches. The man slipped the point of the blade beneath a stitch and jerked the knife upward. Will's skin pulled and throbbed. As the stitch ripped open, Will grimaced.

"My brother," the man started, ripping another stitch free, "was the only person who really cared about me."

Will smirked. "I can't imagine why."

The man popped another stitch open and Will cringed.

"I'm not sure how it became my fault that he killed a dozen people."

"You put him away."

"A lot of people helped put him away."

"Yes, but most of them would still be chasing their tails if it hadn't been for you and..." He paused, lifting the knife. He used the blade to brush a lock of hair back from Will's forehead. "Your brilliant mind."

Will leaned his head back a little, trying to steer clear of the knife. A moment later, he felt the cold steel beneath his temple. The pressure increased until he felt a sharp pain and the warm trickle of blood down the side of his face.

"Your brilliant mind couldn't save you this time."

Will let his eyes fall closed. If only the people in his life hadn't been so certain that he had made up the entire ordeal. If only he had been able to convince him. If only he hadn't let their doubts creep into his own mind. If only...

But was it real? The pain in his leg and wrist and face felt real. Too real. He couldn't imagine sensations so painful being nothing more than the product of a hallucination. But, for once, he wished that he was hallucinating.

The man continued to use the knife on Will, creating new wounds as well as re-opening the cuts on his wrists. They bled but not like before. Not in such a way that Will worried how long he had left.

The man cut him above the eyebrow, a laceration that felt deep and stung more than the others. Blood trickled down that side of Will's face. He wondered how many new scars would come from the night. He wondered if he would live long enough for the wounds to scar at all.

He doubted it.

As the man threatened to cut off Will's fingers, the latter listened to the sound of his phone ringing once again from the bedroom. And, once again, he thought about who it could be. Who he wanted it to be. He thought about what he would rather be doing at that moment.

Forced himself to concentrate on that thought. To retreat into the tranquil stream in his mind and accept his fate.

He grimaced around the pain in his little finger and forced himself to focus on the fluid water surrounding him. He wasn't alone. He turned his head to see Hannibal standing on the shoreline. The doctor nodded his acknowledgement and Will smiled. He didn't know how long it would be before the stream took him. But he was content to wait with Hannibal.

The pain in his finger ceased moments later. Then came a familiar voice.

"I kindly suggest stepping away from Mr. Graham."

Will's stomach tightened at the sound of the heavy accent. He opened his eyes and turned towards the voice. Hannibal stood at the end of the hallway, just inside the front room. He held another of Will's kitchen knives in his hand.

Chapter 25

Hannibal sped towards Will's house. He had never been happy that Will lived so far away. But it had never before been such a dire situation.

He kept his eyes on the road as he opened the tablet and set it on the passenger seat. He glanced at the feed every few moments until he saw Will pull into the driveway. He retrieved his phone and tried Will's number, but it went straight to voice mail once again.

Because he had hurried out to his car, Hannibal hadn't kept his eyes on the tablet the entire time. But he thought it safe to assume that the man was inside Will's house.

Waiting for him.

Will had been right all along.

Thirty minutes after Hannibal watched on the screen as Will arrived home, the doctor turned onto the deserted road that led to Will's secluded house. He killed the headlights and followed the road by the light of the night sky.

Will's house came into view a few moments later, the roof illuminated by the dim, silvery light of the moon. Lights were on inside the house and Hannibal couldn't help but wonder what kind of situation into which he would be walking.

He stopped his car at the beginning of the driveway. He turned off the engine and got out of the vehicle, gently closing the door. He fished his phone from his pocket and dialed Will's number again. It rang several times with no answer. He couldn't hear it ringing from inside the house, but that was no surprise. When Will's voicemail message began to play, Hannibal disconnected the call and tucked his phone away.

He stalked towards the house. He crept onto the porch and peered into the window. The curtains were parted enough that he could see in the front room.

Hannibal's predatory instincts kicked in at the sight of Will tied to a chair. The man from the video was in the room with him, crouched down in front of Will. He had a knife in hand and dragged it across Will's skin above his eyebrow. Blood trickled down the side of the empath's face.

Hannibal looked towards the front door. There was a cooler on the porch beside it, and Hannibal could smell the pungent fragrance of fish starting to go bad.

He turned around and walked back down the side porch steps. Using the front door would eliminate most of his element of surprise. He had to get into the house without Will's attacker hearing him. Hannibal hurried along the side of the house. He rounded the corner and tested the back door. It was unlocked. Hannibal eased it open and slipped inside.

He expected Will's dogs to flock to him, giving away his presence, but they didn't. He hadn't seen any sign of them outside and he wondered where they could be. And if they were okay. He didn't know what it would do to Will if the dogs were not okay. But he couldn't think about that at the moment. Will was his only priority.

Hannibal scanned the dark kitchen until his eyes landed on what he had been searching for. He walked across the room and pulled a carving knife from the butcher's block. He noticed that another knife slot was vacant, and he assumed the man was using Will's own knife on him.

Hannibal removed his coat and draped it over the back of a chair at the kitchen table. Then, he crept down the hall towards the light of the front room. As he eased closer, he saw Will before he saw the other man. The empath was seated on a desk chair, bound to it by rope. His eyes were closed and his head forward. Hannibal watched him for a few moments until he detected the distinct rise and fall of his chest. Then he took a few more steps forward until he emerged from the hallway.

"I kindly suggest stepping away from Mr. Graham."

The other man turned to look in Hannibal's direction. If he was surprised to see someone else in the house, he didn't show it. Hannibal took a step forward, gripping the knife tightly.

"Hannibal?" Will uttered. His voice was weak and hoarse. His head lolled to the side and Hannibal saw that he was bleeding from several lacerations, not just on his face. From what he could discern from across the room, none of the wounds appeared to be life-threatening.

"Ah, yes," the man said. He stood up from his crouching position in front of Will. He turned towards Hannibal but stayed where he was. "The psychiatrist."

Hannibal's nerves felt electrified. He wanted to attack, but he knew he had to bide his time and wait for the right moment. "You know who I am." Hannibal tilted his head. "This is the moment where you introduce yourself."

A smile spread across the man's face. "I don't believe my name is important."

"Who we are is not in a name alone."

"No. And who I am," the man began. He glanced at Will and continued, "Who I am doesn't matter since he took my brother from me."

"How did he take him from you?"

Will moaned. In a whisper, he said, "I helped put the psycho behind bars."

Hannibal watched the man's jaw clench. He turned towards Will and brought the knife down, stabbing Will in the thigh. Will cried out.

When the man ripped the blade free, blood coated more than an inch of the end of the blade.

"Will, you are not helping matters," Hannibal said.

Will panted. Between breaths, he said, "He's just as psychotic as his brother."

"I thought you said that you didn't want me to kill you quickly."

Will offered a wry smile.

"Will," Hannibal said. "I implore you to politely refrain from speaking."

"Whatever you want, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal returned his attention to the man who stared down at Will with feral, predatory eyes. "Perhaps you and I can finish working this out. I believe Mr. Graham has suffered enough."

The man smirked. "Mr. Graham will not have suffered enough until I slit his throat after he has begged me for mercy."

"I see." Hannibal took a few more slow steps forward. "However, I, unfortunately, cannot allow you to continue torturing him."

The man moved around the other side of Will so that the empath was between them. "I am not sure you will be given much choice in the matter."

"We are always given a choice." Hannibal stopped walking. He was half an arm's length away from Will. "Or we take it ourselves."

The man nodded slowly. "Like I have made my choice about him."

"And like the one I have made about you."

One side of the man's mouth curled upward in an odd smile. "And what choice would that be?"

Hannibal reached out and put his free hand on Will's shoulder. Then, he squeezed firmly and pulled Will towards him. The chair crashed to the floor with Will in it. Hannibal leapt over him as the other man rushed backwards. As Hannibal got closer, the man wielded the knife towards him. Hannibal dodged the maneuver, and the man slashed the air between them instead.

The man came at Hannibal again and the doctor blocked with his free arm. He stabbed towards the man with the knife he still held, but the man blocked him as well. With their arms tied up, Hannibal gripped his arms and pulled him in. He head-butted the man in the nose, and the latter loosened his grip and stumbled backwards.

Bright red blood trickled from his nostrils and he swiped at it with the back of his free hand. He kept his eyes on Hannibal as he did so, keeping more than an arm's length between them. Hannibal moved in again.

The two of them tussled back and forth for a while, neither getting the clear upper hand. They wound their way around the living room until they were nearly back to where Will was tipped

over in the chair. The man lunged at Hannibal who dodged the knife but took the brunt of the man's weight as he plowed into Hannibal.

They were both sent to the floor. The other man was on top of Hannibal and the latter worked his knife hand free long enough to bury the tip of the blade in the man's side. The man cried out, but even without looking, Hannibal could tell that the wound was not deep.

Hannibal grasped tightly to the other man's knife hand, holding the sharp weapon at bay. The man brought his free hand up and punched Hannibal in the mouth. Hannibal sank the knife blade deeper into the man's side.

The man cried out and then drew his whole arm back and brought his elbow down into Hannibal's face. The pain was intense but nothing Hannibal couldn't compartmentalize. But when the man drew his elbow back again, Hannibal instinctively brought his knife hand up to protect his face. He knocked the man's arm to the side and then used the momentum to roll the man off of him.

In his plan to get out from under the man, he had left the knife in the man's side. But he was suddenly weaponless. He sprang to his feet and assumed a defensive fighting stance.

The man scrambled to his feet, still holding onto his original knife. He reached down and pulled Hannibal's knife from his side and dropped it on the floor. Hannibal took note of where it landed, watching as Will's eyes widened slightly at the sight of the knife only inches from his bound hand.

"Come and get it," the man wheezed.

Hannibal's nose twitched. But he otherwise remained where he was. A few moments later, the man launched himself forward.

Hannibal kept his eyes focused on the knife in the man's hand. He dodged and blocked and defended himself as the man pushed forward. Hannibal's back was against the wall a few moments later. He blocked another slice attempt and twisted the man's arm around until he was forced to drop the knife. When it was safely on the floor, Hannibal used his free hand to punch the man in the kidney.

The man groaned and crumpled slightly. Hannibal shoved him face first against the wall. He twisted the man's arm until he heard a pop. The man cried out as his struggle lessened. Hannibal punched him in the same kidney again. His whole body crumpled as he collapsed against the edge of a book case.

Hannibal let go of the man's arm, and he fell to the floor. Hannibal kept an eye on him as he walked back over to where the man had dropped the second knife. But as he bent down to pick it up, the man reached behind him and came out with a gun. Hannibal snatched the knife and dove behind an arm chair as a shot rang out.

He flipped the knife around so that he was holding onto the blade. Keeping himself blocked by the chair, he turned around to face the back of it and got into a crouch.

He waited. He wasn't sure what he was waiting for, but after a few moments, he heard it. The man let out a groan and Hannibal assumed he was attempting to get to his feet. Hannibal popped out from behind the chair and flung the knife in the man's direction.

The blade stuck in the man's shoulder – the same one Hannibal had dislocated moments earlier – and the man let out a cry. Hannibal was about to rush to Will when another shot rang out. He tucked himself behind the chair again, unsure of where to go. But then another shot rang out, and Hannibal felt the side of his face burn as the force of the bullet – slight graze as it was – sent him to the floor.

“Hannibal!” Will cried out.

Hannibal put a hand to his face and then pulled it back. His entire palm was red, but from the sensation alone, he could tell that the wound was not serious. He looked at Will who had the first dropped knife in his hand. The rope was frayed around his wrist. Hannibal put a finger to his lips.

Understanding registered in Will's eyes, but the frightened and worried look didn't vanish from them. Hannibal remained still, watching as Will sawed at his ropes.

But the empath continued to watch Hannibal. He kept glancing back and forth, and Hannibal wasn't sure what else he was looking at. Then, Will widened his eyes as though trying to tell Hannibal something. Will looked where he had been glancing before and nodded in that direction. Hannibal tried to see what he was looking at but the arm chair blocked his view of whatever it was.

A few moments later, the rope around Will's wrist popped free. He was able to unbind himself without having to cut anymore. But as he freed himself, Hannibal heard a groan from the other side of the room.

Hannibal pushed himself up so that he was crouched, once again, behind the arm chair. He took note of the small hole in the back of the arm chair that had ripped the fabric and nearly ended Hannibal's life. He remained as quiet as he could, hoping Will's attacker thought he was dead.

The hard wood floor creaked moments later, and Hannibal knew that the man had gotten to his feet. He glanced towards Will who was free of the desk chair but looked too weak to get up and run. Or fight.

As the floor boards creaked more, Hannibal slipped around the side of the arm chair. He was behind the man, watching as the latter slowly approached Will. His dislocated and stabbed arm hung limply at his side, but he had the gun in his other hand.

Hannibal looked towards the book case but didn't see the knife. The man didn't have it in his hand. Hannibal assumed he must have left it in his shoulder, probably for fear of bleeding out if he removed it.

Hannibal glanced around the room, looking for any kind of weapon that could assist him in taking down Will's attacker. He scanned the walls and the floor, and finally, his eyes came to

a rest on something he thought would be very useful. The same thing he assumed Will had been looking at moments earlier. The thing to which the empath had been trying to draw Hannibal's attention.

Hannibal crept forward and grabbed the fire poker from in front of the arm chair. He quietly got to his feet. He rushed across the floor and drove the fire poker through the middle of the man's back.

The man let out a guttural sound, and Hannibal knew he had impaled a lung. As the man sank to his knees, a shot rang out. Hannibal twisted the fire poker and then ripped it from the man's back. The man collapsed onto the floor, the gun falling from his hand and clattering on the hard wood floor. Hannibal put two fingers to the man's neck. Satisfied that there was no pulse, he dropped the fire poker and turned his attention to Will.

The empath was still on the floor. His face and clothes were covered in multiple smears and blossoms of blood. His eyes were closed.

Hannibal knelt down beside him. "Will."

Will groaned and his eyes squeezed closed even more tightly. Will had been clutching his lower abdomen, near his side. Hannibal had thought Will was in pain from a previous injury, inflicted before Hannibal had arrived. He looked at Will's hand and saw bright red blood seeping out around his fingers.

Hannibal's stomach seized painfully, but he didn't let on. He reached out and pried Will's hand from the wound. "Let me see it."

Will let his hand be maneuvered away from his side. Hannibal couldn't get a good sense of the damage. He pinched the hem of Will's shirt and pulled it up.

"How bad is it?" Will rasped.

Will's skin was covered in the sticky red blood. More slowly seeped from the wound, but Hannibal let out a relieved sigh.

"What?"

"It's not bad," Hannibal answered truthfully. The bullet had barely done more than graze Will. It had remained shallow but had taken a small amount of flesh with it. The wound was gaping but not deep. "A good cleaning and some stitches, and you will be as good as new."

"Are you sure?"

"Are you questioning my knowledge as a doctor?"

Will chuckled and abruptly stopped, letting out a moan. "Of course not, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal pulled his pocket square from his suit jacket and shook it out. He put it against Will's side and pressed firmly. Will groaned.

Hannibal retrieved his phone from his pocket and called for an ambulance. When he hung up, Will grabbed a hold of Hannibal's hand.

Hannibal thought for a moment that Will was trying to pull his hands away from the wound. He wanted to apologize for putting Will in additional pain and explain to him that it was necessary in order to stop the bleeding.

But Will didn't pull his hands away. He rested his own on top of Hannibal's and squeezed gently.

"Thank you," he whispered after several seconds.

"You don't need to thank me."

Will nodded. "Thank you for pulling me out of the stream."

Hannibal watched Will's face, waiting for an explanation. Will looked up at him for several moments, but then his eyes drifted closed.

"Will."

Will hummed low in his throat.

"Stay awake for me."

Will's eyes fluttered open. They remained heavy and unfocused, but he kept them open.

"Anything for you, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal knew it was from the blood loss. The pain had certainly gone to Will's head. The stress of the evening had gotten to him. He knew Will was overwhelmed by everything that had happened.

Nonetheless, Hannibal couldn't help but smile.

Chapter 26

After Hannibal determined that Will's gunshot wound wasn't severe, he checked the rest of Will's injuries. He didn't seem overly concerned about any of them – despite how much pain they caused Will. Hannibal waited with him, calmly urging Will to stay awake.

After a few minutes, Hannibal checked Will's gunshot wound again to find that the bleeding had stopped. He then called Jack to let him know what had happened. When the ambulance arrived, Will thought that Hannibal would stay behind to meet up with Jack. But after Will's stretcher was eased into the back of the ambulance, Hannibal climbed inside and took a seat beside him.

Will found his own eyes drifting closed again. Hannibal didn't insist that he stay awake that time. Instead, Will heard him giving the paramedic a rundown of all of Will's injuries. Will lost count after Hannibal listed the gunshot wound and half a dozen lacerations.

Will was in and out for most of the ambulance ride. He remembered the bright lights of the hospital corridors. He assumed he was taken somewhere to get stitches, but the next thing he knew, he was lying in a hospital bed, shirtless, with a blanket pulled up to the middle of his chest.

He put a hand to his side and found that the gunshot wound had been bandaged. He let out a groan as he tried to sit up.

“Lie still.”

Will looked towards the voice, finding Hannibal approaching his bed. He was dressed in the same outfit as before – a dark gray shirt with a burgundy vest and matching checkered tie – except he was missing his suit jacket.

Will relaxed on the bed.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asked once he had reached the edge of the bed.

“Like I was tortured.”

“I am told that you are going to be fine.”

“Good,” Will uttered, trying to sit up again. “Maybe I can get out of this bed tonight.”

Hannibal reached out and put a gentle hand on Will's shoulder. The doctor tilted his head, giving Will a look full of admonishment. “Will, relax.”

Will fumbled for the remote attached to the bed.

Hannibal took it from him. “Lie back.”

Will sighed and did as he was told.

“What do you need?”

“I want to sit up.”

Hannibal pushed a button on the remote and the bed slowly inclined. When Will felt comfortable, he said, “That’s good. Thank you.”

“You are very welcome.” Hannibal set the remote on the edge of the bed.

“So, I’m getting out of here tonight, right?”

“No,” Hannibal answered without hesitation. “Your doctor would like to monitor you overnight.”

“You are my doctor.”

Hannibal smiled, little crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes. “Your other doctor.”

“Maybe I’d rather have your opinion.”

“My opinion is the same as his.”

Will sighed.

“It is already late, Will. You need rest. When you wake up, I will return to take you home. You will hardly even know you are in the hospital.”

Will smirked. “Right.” He took a deep breath and let his eyes stare, unfocused, at the wall across the room. “How did you know to come?”

“I checked the surveillance feed,” Hannibal answered. “I tried to call you, but each of my calls went to voicemail.”

“I was out fishing all day,” Will said. Then, he looked at Hannibal and explained further. “My phone died.”

“Yes, I assumed as much.”

“How are my dogs?” Will asked.

Hannibal’s brow furrowed.

“You didn’t see them?”

“No, Will. I have been with you since I arrived at your house.”

“Oh,” Will muttered. He hadn’t seen his dogs since his attacker had ordered him to close the door to the bedroom before he tortured Will. The man had assured Will he hadn’t done anything to harm them, but Will had no real reason to believe him. His stomach fluttered. “I need to see them.” He grabbed the edge of the blanket and threw it back.

“Will.”

Will shifted on the bed, groaning quietly as the movements made him ache all over.

Hannibal put a firm hand on his shoulder. “Will, you need to stay in bed.”

“I can stay in bed at home. I need to check on them.” Will tried to move, but Hannibal’s grip was tight, keeping him in place.

“I will call Jack.”

Will shook his head. “Alana.”

“Jack is already at your house.”

Of course Jack was there. He would undoubtedly have a forensics team going over the entire house. Not only had Will been tortured there, but Hannibal had killed the man who had done the torturing. Even if Will had been released from the hospital, he wouldn’t be allowed to go home and sleep in his own bed. He rested his head back and sighed.

Hannibal let go of his shoulder and grabbed the edge of the blanket. He pulled it up and draped it over Will’s bare torso. “Rest, Will. I will have Jack make sure your dogs are okay.”

“I’m sure he’s too busy with the crime scene.”

“I am sure he wouldn’t mind checking on your dogs for you.”

Will snorted. “Right.”

Hannibal smiled gently. “Perhaps he would allow me to check on them, then.”

Will perked up. “You would do that?”

Hannibal nodded slowly. “Only if you promise to get some rest.”

Will smiled. “I promise.”

Will was released from the hospital the next day. He and Hannibal had made plans to pick out a new car for Will over the weekend. And Hannibal had mentioned wanting to invite Will to dinner but had insisted that they wait until Will felt better. Will had reassured Hannibal that he felt fine and would love to spend an evening having dinner with Hannibal. The doctor had seemed unsure, giving Will one of his admonishing looks. But he had ultimately decided to invite Will anyway.

Will was tired and sore, but his stomach flip-flopped with excitement. He had rung the doorbell moments earlier and waited on the outside of Hannibal’s front door. He held a gift box filled with a bottle of wine – the most expensive bottle of alcohol he had ever purchased. But it was one he knew Hannibal often drank.

He had been so grateful for Hannibal's timing. Sure, he had endured torture for the better part of an hour, but if Hannibal had arrived any later, Will might have already been dead. He hadn't been able to properly express his gratitude to the doctor, and he hoped the bottle of wine said what he couldn't.

The front door swung open moments later, and Hannibal smiled at him from the other side of the threshold. The doctor wore a royal blue dress shirt beneath a gray plaid waistcoat and matching pants. His floral tie coordinated nicely with the ensemble, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

"Good evening, Will."

"Hello, Hannibal."

"Please, come in." Hannibal opened the door wider and stepped aside.

Will walked in and waited for Hannibal to close the door. "I brought you a gift."

Hannibal's eyebrows rose as he looked at Will and then the rectangular gift box in his hands. Will held it out to Hannibal and was suddenly very glad that he had decided to have the wine gift wrapped. He wasn't sure he could've given it the elegant touch it deserved.

"Thank you, Will." Hannibal took the box. "Perhaps we should get more comfortable before I open it."

"Sounds good." Will removed his coat and Hannibal immediately took it from him, hanging it up on the coat rack behind the door.

"Dinner is nearly ready," Hannibal said. "Let us wait in the dining room."

Will nodded and then Hannibal gestured for him to go first. Will walked through the house until he reached the dining room. He walked to the end of the table and turned around to face Hannibal.

The doctor joined him and asked, "Shall I open this now?"

"Yeah, if you want."

Hannibal offered a small smile and then untied the ribbon. He pulled the lid from the top and set it and the ribbon down on the dining room table. Then he reached inside the box and pulled out the bottle of wine. Will watched his eyes as he read the label and grinned when Hannibal smiled.

"Thank you, Will. I am very fond of this wine."

"I know."

Hannibal looked at him and smiled. Will thought he detected a hint of surprise in the doctor's eyes.

Will suddenly felt odd. Not because of Hannibal's reaction. Not because of anything really, other than his own nerves. He wasn't sure why he was nervous. At least, he tried not to let himself think about the reason, anyway. He suddenly felt the need to justify his gesture.

"I just wanted to say thank you," Will said quickly, his words running together.

"Thank you?" Hannibal asked. "For what?"

"For..." Will trailed off. He had nearly said For rescuing me but thought better of it. He thought that made him sound like some damsel in distress. He shrugged a shoulder, trying to appear nonchalant despite the infestation of butterflies in his stomach. "Just for being there." His stomach seized at the words. He thought, somehow, that that explanation had been worse than the one he hadn't said. He resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands.

"I am your friend, Will." Hannibal took a step forward. Then, he reached out and placed his hand on Will's shoulder, squeezing gently. "I will always be here for you."

Will smiled, hoping it didn't appear as awkward as it felt. He didn't know why he was so nervous all of a sudden. He had been alone with Hannibal countless times before. Many of those times to have dinner just like that evening. But Will couldn't get the rescue out of his head. He couldn't stop thinking about the fact that Hannibal had saved him just a couple of nights earlier. If it hadn't been for Hannibal, Will would be dead. Something about that made him feel differently around Hannibal.

It made him feel differently *about* Hannibal.

"I will take this to the kitchen and let it chill," the doctor said. "We can have it with dinner."

"Great," Will said.

Hannibal nodded. He gathered the empty box, lid and ribbon from the table. He started towards the kitchen but as he walked by Will, the latter reached out and grabbed the doctor's arm.

Hannibal stopped and swiveled his head to look at Will who immediately regretted the action. Will opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. He didn't know what to say. He wasn't even sure what he was thinking, let alone how to convey that to Hannibal. Without uttering a sound, Will closed his mouth and let go of Hannibal's arm. He let his hand fall to his side as he looked away from the doctor's face.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Hannibal's smile. He waited for the doctor to question him about the action, but he didn't. Instead, Hannibal turned back towards the kitchen and continued walking.

Will looked over his shoulder and watched as the doctor disappeared around the corner. His stomach felt nervous and unsettled, and he couldn't help but feel like the relationship between the two of them was somehow irrevocably changed.

Will let the smile overtake him.

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